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THE HEIR EXPECTANT.

VOL I.

THE HEIR EXPECTANT.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“RAYMOND’S HEROINE,”

&c. &c.

Albion

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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PROLOGUE.—THE BARGAIN.

CHAPTER I.

Lares and Penates.

“**H**URRAH! I’ve got it. You dear, darling Agnes, what do you think of that? Yes, I’ve got it—really and truly got it, and all in fair fight, so here goes!”

With these words a school-boy’s cap was flung high into the air, and then, being dexterously re-caught, was made to whirl in frantic gyrations round the head of its owner. This was a tall, comely youth, who might have been styled boy or young man, according to the age of the person called upon to make the definition—that is to say, he was somewhere between sixteen and seventeen years old. He had just come bursting into a room where a woman about ten

years his senior sat nursing a baby at the fireside, while two other very young children played near her—a homely interior enough, but made cosy-looking by bright candle-light, red stuff curtains closely drawn, and a well-spread tea-table. The time was a winter evening in the year 184—.

The woman looked up with a face which, though it lacked the youthful freshness of the boy's, was not unlike his in its general shape and dark yet clear complexion.

“What, Harry! The scholarship!”

“Yes, got it as sure as my name is Harold Maxwell, and all the masters as pleased and complimentary——’pon my word, I think they laid the butter on almost too thick. If you had only been there! but of course you couldn’t because of baby. So I’m to go to Oxford next term—was there ever anything half so jolly?”

“My dear, dear Harry! I am so glad—so proud—— But I always knew my brother would make me proud of him.”

The boy shook back the hair joyously from his temples.

“Well, well, I don’t know about proud; but you shall never be ashamed of me, that’s one thing certain. Nor you either, young shaver,” he went on, coming forward to pinch the baby’s cheek, who acknowledged the attention by kicking and crowing uproariously. “What a little Turk it is, and knows that I’m his uncle as well—ah! as well as the other rogues there.”

With this the young uncle got on his knees to kiss and hug the other two children, who came pressing about him, stroking him and poking him and fighting him with such gusto as showed that he was a familiar and favourite play-fellow.

“Ah! you monkeys, is that the way you serve me? Why, how strong Aggy is growing! She’ll be more than a match for me soon, and as for Austy, he’s a perfect prize-fighter. Look, I’ve not forgotten you, here’s some toffee to eat my health with; you must learn to be as glad of the good news as I am. But seriously,” and here the lad sprang once more to his feet, and approached his sister with glowing cheeks, “isn’t it glorious good news? Ah! you dear

Agnes, I knew how pleased you would be. And how pleased Austin will be too, won't he? He has not come in yet, I suppose?"

"Not yet. I expect him every minute. Yes, indeed he will be delighted, I can answer for him, and as proud of you as I am."

"Well, he may be proud of himself if he likes, for it was all his doing. Ah! Agnes, I haven't said anything about it yet, but you need not think I have forgotten it. He's the primest fellow breathing, and I hope I shall live to pay him back something of what he has done for me, that's all. What! Austy, at it again, are you?"

In another moment he was once more on his knees, giving himself up to a game of romps with the children, while their mother looked on with radiant eyes which showed how happy the youth's tidings had made her. And here, leaving the brother and sister thus occupied, it may be well to say a few words of their antecedents and present circumstances.

They were the only children of a country surgeon who had once been very successful in his profession, but who had died some year

since considerably straitened in his means, leaving behind him barely enough to keep his son and daughter out of actual want, to say nothing of securing a suitable education for the boy, then little more than a child. Fortunately, however, the daughter had just before her father's death accepted an offer of marriage from one Austin Waters—a handsome young fellow who, perhaps by reason of his handsomeness, had succeeded in finding the way to her heart. At the time of the engagement he had been considered by her friends as rather beneath her in station, being only a clerk in a Liverpool merchant's office; but now, measured by the standard of her altered prospects, his salary seemed to promise her a position of comparative affluence. Her own future was thus safe, but she was not satisfied until she had provided for that of her young brother also, by stipulating that he should be an inmate of her new home—a condition easily assented to by Waters, who was both an ardent lover and a good-natured fellow to boot. The arrangement then made had continued in force ever since, working to the entire satisfaction of all parties concerned, so that the

that nobody could have had the heart to find fault with it.

"Well, here I am!" he exclaimed on entering, rubbing his hands cheerily the while. "Hollo, Austy, hollo, Aggy, and how are you getting along? Hands off, younkers, or you'll pull me to pieces between you. But my stars, if here isn't Uncle Harry back from the examination. Well, my lad, what news? Out with it."

"He has succeeded, Austin," put in Mrs. Waters triumphantly. "He is going to Oxford next term."

"Going to Oxford, is he!" echoed her husband, bringing his broad palms together with a smack that made the tea-things ring. "Well done, Harry, but I always said he would be the big man of the family. Going to Oxford! Shake hands on it, my boy, and here's long life and good luck to you!"

So saying, he seized the youth's hand in both his, and shook it with might and main.

"I'm sure, Austin, I never can say how much obliged I am to you," said the boy, blushing up to his eyes at the exuberance of his brother-in-law's congratulations. "Not only for your kind-

ness just now, you know, but all along. It was all through you I was ever able to do it, I have not forgotten that."

"Pooh, pooh! not a word, my dear fellow, not a word. It's we who have got to thank you for being such a big man, and giving us somebody to be proud of. Why, you'll be a judge or a bishop some day, or member of Parliament at the very least, and then shan't we boast of you, and won't little Harry stand six inches higher in his shoes to think that he has got such a god-father? Eh! baby, eh! won't you? Bless me, how that child does grow! And now, Agnes, perhaps you won't mind putting him down and giving me a bit of something, for I'm as hungry as a wolf. Come along, let's sit down and be jolly, and Harry will tell us all about the examination. Now, children, be a little quiet, if you can."

The baby was laid down, and, the rest of the family being settled round the tea-table, Mr. Waters applied himself to the business of the meal with as much diligence as was compatible with attention to the claims of a hungry little mouth on each side, and a desire to lose nothing

of what his brother-in-law was saying about the examination. It was some time before the confusion abated, but at last, the children having been plied with bread and jam to their hearts content, and Harold having finished his account of the day's proceedings amid fresh congratulations, there came a momentary lull, during which the master of the house sat silently stirring his tea, with a contemplative air not usual with him. Presently he looked round the table, and, still stirring his tea thoughtfully, began: "By the way, I have news to-day too. Uncle Gilbert is in Liverpool just now."

"Your uncle Gilbert here!" said Mrs. Waters in manifest surprise. "No, surely!"

"Yes, but he is though; they were talking about him at the office to-day—old Waters, the Bristol banker, they called him—little thinking of course that I was his own full nephew. Yes, he is really in Liverpool—looking up some debts, they say. And do you know he is actually going to give up business!"

"Give up business! I should have thought he was a great deal too fond of making money for that."

"Yes, but there's one thing he is still fonder of, and that is, of keeping it when he has made it, and I dare say he gets more afraid of the risks of business as he grows older. And perhaps (though I suppose that's hardly possible) perhaps he thinks he has made enough by this time. They say he is worth a hundred and fifty thousand—what do you think of that? A hundred and fifty thousand!"

"It seems a great deal certainly," acquiesced Mrs. Waters in rather awe-struck tones.

"A great deal—I should think it was," said her husband, stirring his tea again, a little more vigorously this time. "A strange thing, eh, that I should be the only relation he has in the world, and pottering on at two hundred a year while he is counting his money by the hundred thousand. And here he is in the same town, and I suppose wouldn't so much as say how d'ye do if he was to see me."

And as Austin Waters spoke thus, the tendency of his voice to an upward inflection made itself more audible than it had yet done this evening.

"Never mind, dear Austin," said Mrs. Waters

soothingly. "It is very sad to be on bad terms with a relation of course, and it was cruel to quarrel with you just because you were generous enough to marry a wife without money; still I have often thought that very likely you would have been no better off if he had continued friendly with you. Everybody says he is such a dreadful miser, you know——"

"Oh yes! miser enough, that's certain. But don't you go and think that I am complaining, Agnes—of course I know it can't be helped. No, no, all I mean to say is that it is very queer to think of my being so poor with a rich old fellow like that for an uncle, and you can't deny that it is; uncommon queer, and rather trying too perhaps. It isn't such a pleasant thing to be poor that one need pretend to like it."

"Well now, I'm not so sure of that," put in Harold with boyish decision. "You may laugh, Austin, and I dare say you will, but for my part I always think a fellow ought to be better pleased with being poor at first, because then, do you see, you've got to make up the score with your own strokes, and that is ever so much jollier than taking odds. And you may say that

rich chaps—chaps that begin by being rich, I mean—have odds given them whether they like it or not, and 'pon my word I have often thought it very hard on them, I have indeed. There, you think me precious green, don't you, but that's my way of looking at things, and I'm sure you'd find it a very comfortable way if you'd only take it."

"Ah! it's well enough for you to talk so now," said Mr. Waters, balancing his spoon on the edge of his tea-cup with a slightly discontented air, "but only wait till you are my age, and you'll find that money is a better thing than you think. Not that I expect ever to see much of it, goodness knows. Some people in this world are cut out for luck, and some aren't."

With this the speaker sighed, and the spoon fell into his cup.

"Come, come, Austin, how do you know that?" said the boy. "I'll tell you what—don't you trouble your head about it, and perhaps some day the old fellow's money may come tumbling in to you just when you least expect it."

"Ah! it's all very fine, but I know Uncle

Gilbert better than you do, and I know that when he once takes a thing into his head he sticks to it like wax. Why, if he had ever intended to be friends, wouldn't he have taken some notice of that letter I was fool enough to write him on his birthday?—and that's more than three months ago now, you see. No, no, not a penny of his money will ever come my way, so I may as well make up my mind to do without it."

"Well, better do without it than be hanging about for it all your life," said Harold stoutly. "A fellow who does nothing but look to see which way other fellows send their balls can't do much good with his own, you know. Don't you be in the blues, Austin, I'll back you to turn up trumps without Uncle Gilbert to help you."

"I'm not in the blues, as you call it, I only say that money is money, and that it's a hard thing to see one's nearest relations wallowing in wealth while one is as poor as a church mouse oneself. And so it is hard—confounded hard."

"I am very sorry, Austin," murmured Mrs. Waters's gentle deprecating voice from the

other end of the table—"very sorry indeed, and all the sorrier of course to think that it happened on my account. Though still it was not my fault that he chose to be so unkind, and I am sure you know, dear, that so far as I can repay you by trying to make you happy——"

"Happy, you darling!" interrupted her husband, the implied appeal to his magnanimity restoring him to his pristine good-humour as if by magic. "Happy"—and he emphasised the word by jumping up and rapping the table—"I'm the happiest dog alive, and if you think for one moment that I regret——What! haven't I got you, and haven't I got the children, and haven't I got Harry, and isn't it a pride and a pleasure to do what I can for you all? Not that I don't like my work for its own sake, mind you; it would be strange if I didn't at the rate I'm getting on. If you had only been in the office to hear the way old Smith was talking to-day! I shouldn't wonder a bit if he raises me another fifty before I'm a month older, and wouldn't that be glorious—two hundred and fifty a year! Happy—I should think I was happy. Give us a kiss, Agnes, and never talk

such nonsense again. And you, Harry, shake hands; you were right, and I was wrong; the money is all my eye, filthy lucre, eh? And now we'll have another cup, and mother shall give Austy and Aggy some more jam, and we'll all be jolly together."

He returned to his place between the two children with a beaming face in which were reflected the loving looks cast at him by his wife from the other end of the table, while Austy and Aggy, ogling Uncle Harry with all their might, drummed loudly on their plates in token of satisfaction, and even the baby sent forth from his cradle at the fireside a sympathetic coo of approval. Never surely was there a happier family group, and that evening would probably have been for all present one of the pleasantest they had ever known but for an interruption which came just as the enjoyment thus reached its height.

Somebody knocked smartly at the street-door.

"Hollo! what's that?" said the head of the family, stopping in the act of conveying a spoonful of jam to one of the little

plates on each side of him. "A visitor at this time of day! Shall I go and see who it is?"

"It must be some mistake, surely," said Mrs. Waters, looking a little annoyed. "No, you needn't trouble yourself—there is Susan going."

The bustling foot-step of a small maid-of-all-work was heard pattering along the passage, and, the street-door having been opened, another foot-step—a slow creaking one this time—was heard advancing towards the parlour.

"Oh! sir," said the little maid-servant, putting in her head, "here's a gentleman who—"

But before she had time to complete the sentence, a figure appeared behind hers, at sight of which Austin Waters gave a great start of recognition, while, transfixed to his chair in sheer astonishment, he exclaimed tremulously:

"Uncle Gilbert!"

CHAPTER II.

Uncle Gilbert.

FOR some seconds a solemn silence rested on all that little group, the eyes of every one being turned as by a kind of fascination towards the doorway. And yet the figure which stood there scarcely seemed calculated to command any extraordinary tribute of respect or deference, being simply that of a wiry withered little old man of sixty-five or so, attired in a tight-fitting suit of rather rusty black, with scanty iron-grey hair and whiskers, and sunken grey eyes surrounded by innumerable crows'-feet. But, insignificant as Uncle Gilbert looked, he was known to be worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and the mysterious hush that greeted his entrance was an act of homage which all present unconsciously combined to render to Mammon as embodied in his person.

He remained standing for some time on the

threshold, surveying those in the room with a grim smile, in apparent enjoyment of the effect produced by his presence; then, coming a step forward, he began, still with the same grim smile :

“ Well, nephew Austin, so you know me again, I see.”

His voice was naturally harsh and grating, and, whether for this reason or simply because it was that of a stranger, the baby most unfortunately took the opportunity of setting up a lamentable howl.

Uncle Gilbert frowned.

“ I can’t stand this, you know. I’m ready to go away without troubling you further, but I can’t stay in the same room with such a row as that. Can’t you put a stop to it, somebody ?”

The last words were spoken to the little maid-servant, who, infected by the general awe, had fallen back into the passage, where she stood regarding the new-comer in mute consternation, and uncertain whether her further services were required. As she found herself thus invoked, she looked timidly towards her master for instructions.

"Yes, yes, take him away," was the impatient answer. "I am very sorry you should be so annoyed, uncle, but——"

"Never mind, so long as there's no more of it. Perhaps if the young woman could make it convenient to clear the other couple off at the same time—I'm uncommon fond of children, you see, only I like their room better than their company, he! he!"

"Get away, children, get away," said the father, lifting first one child and then the other off its chair in a great hurry. "There, be quiet, and get along with Susan—there."

He pushed them all out very unceremoniously, and then, having shut the door upon them, approached his uncle penitently.

"I'm sure, uncle, I'm very sorry——"

"That will do. And now that we are a little quiet again, perhaps you had better introduce me to your wife. That is the lady, I suppose? How do you do, ma'am? Well, as my nephew had the grace to write me a civil letter some months ago, you see I have come to look at you at last—on the principle of making the best of a bad job, you know, ma'am."

Poor Mrs. Waters coloured, and forced a faint smile by way of answer. There was a short pause, nobody in the room finding anything to say in reply to a speech which all felt to be very rude. One person indeed appeared as though he would have liked to say something, and that was young Harold, who looked up with a quick flush of indignation as his sister was thus addressed. But if he had any idea of speaking he restrained himself, and merely turned his eyes with something of an expectant expression towards Austin Waters.

Austin Waters, however, only said :

“ Won’t you take a seat, uncle ? ”

The old man let himself slowly drop into a chair, glancing round him as he did so in swift yet searching observation of the room and its occupants. Perhaps there was something in Harold’s look which he noticed and understood, for presently his keen grey eyes fastened themselves on the youth with some severity, while he asked his nephew :

“ And pray who is this young gentleman, if I may make so bold ? ”

“ Only Harold Maxwell—my wife’s brother,

you know, uncle, who lives with us," explained Austin with great urbanity.

"Oh indeed! your wife's brother who lives with you. Yes, I think I have heard of that arrangement—a very pleasant one for the young gentleman, no doubt, and remarkably economical."

The lad's face became scarlet, but still he said nothing, this time not even raising his eyes. Mrs. Waters grew very red too, and looked towards her husband. He was evidently a good deal discomposed, and shuffled uneasily in his chair as though not knowing very well what to say. After a while he spoke.

"It was very kind of you to come to see us this evening, I'm sure."

"Well, I happened to be in Liverpool, and I thought I wouldn't leave without seeing you. A cup of tea, Mrs. Waters, if you please."

Mrs. Waters rose, and nervously set about making fresh tea. The old man watched her for a moment, then resumed, lightly switching a few grains of dust from his knee with a pair of black gloves which he invariably carried when he went out, but as invariably abstained from putting on :

"However, it wasn't only to see you that I took the trouble of turning out this cold evening. The fact is, I have an arrangement to propose."

"I am sure we ought to feel very much gratified, sir," said the nephew politely.

"I think you ought, young man. Well, and now I suppose you want to know what it is. In the first place, then, I have got to tell you that I am retiring from business."

"Yes, uncle. I heard them say something about that in our office this morning."

"Did you indeed? Well, if you hear them again, you may tell them they would do better to mind their own affairs. Yes, I am retiring from business. Money is not so easily made that you need wish to run the chance of losing it again when you have spent your whole life in scraping a little together. So, as there will be nothing to tie me any longer to Bristol, I am thinking of going to live in the country on a little property I have at Chorcombe."

This Chorcombe was a small town in Somersetshire—so small that it will be vain to look for it in an ordinary map—where, as Austin

Waters knew, his uncle was possessed of considerable property, which had some years ago fallen into his hands by the foreclosure of a mortgage.

"Oh! indeed, uncle," assented Austin dutifully.

"Yes, I have a large house there—one of the best in the place—that has been standing empty eleven quarters; so, as it doesn't seem likely to let, I suppose I may as well occupy it myself. I must live somewhere, you know."

He shook his head gently as though this were a necessity which he rather deplored than otherwise; then slowly went on, stirring the tea which Mrs. Waters had just handed him:

"And I have been thinking, Austin, that, living like that in the country among a lot of strangers who you may be sure will be doing their best to cheat and impose upon me (I know what human nature is), I have been thinking that it would be a good thing at my time of life to have somebody near me that I could depend upon to stand my friend and take care of my interests. I'm not so young as I was (and I don't mind telling you, Austin, I've put by a

trifle of money that needs a good deal of seeing after), and if I was ever laid up for a few days it is dreadful to think of what might happen with such a set of harpies looking on. So I was going to say that supposing you choose to give up everything here, you may come and live at Chorcombe if you like, and in that case I wouldn't mind promising that the bit of money I may have to leave behind shall go to you when I die."

The eyes of the young man glistened; he had never been accustomed to deal with large sums, and the idea of becoming the ultimate possessor of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds was positively bewildering.

"Yes, I have made up my mind," said Uncle Gilbert, casting a sharp glance upward to note the effect of his words. "You are the only relation left me in the world, and I think the money would have more chance of being taken care of in your hands than if I was to leave it to a lot of dandy clerks and secretaries to build a hospital with, eh?"

"Uncle!" exclaimed Austin gratefully.

"You quite understand, though, what I

should expect on your part. You are to come and live at Chorcombe, not in my house, of course—Heaven forbid, with all those squalling babbies—but I'll look out one of my little cottages for you that I'll let you have rent-free; there, what do you think of that? And then you will have to live like a gentleman, mind you, as my nephew ought to live, for I shall be the great man of the place naturally, and I can't afford to be disgraced by my relations. If you want work I shall find you odd jobs to do for me that will keep your hand in, but you are never to put pen to paper for anybody else, remember. I'm not going to have my nephew hiring himself out by the day, or by the week or the year, either. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Austin with much humility.

"But—but——"

"What is it?" asked the old man sharply.

"What am I to do about a salary, sir? I have nothing of my own, you know, and if you would please to consider——"

"I have considered everything," rejoined the other promptly. "And I have decided to allow you the yearly sum of a hundred pounds. One

hundred pounds," he repeated emphatically, "and next to nothing to do for it."

Austin's countenance fell; it was evident that he regarded the hundred pounds from a point of view quite other than his uncle's.

"A hundred pounds a year with a wife and three children to support!" he exclaimed blankly.

"Certainly—a hundred pounds a year. Bless me, what would people now-a-days have? Young hearty folks like you, and a pack of children—what sort of cockering up do you want that you turn up your noses at a hundred a year? Why, suppose I tell you what my weekly expenses are, and have been for the last twenty years—and mind, in my position I've been obliged to keep up a kind of style. Just seventeen and eightpence halfpenny on the average of the whole year for everything but house-rent, and I've wanted for nothing, look you—not a Sunday out of all the fifty-two that I don't have my hot joint and clean shirt in honour of my Saviour, and I should like to know who need do better than that."

He looked round with an air of stern defiance,

then, finding that no one ventured to differ from him, descended from dogma to argument.

“And you’ll bear in mind that Chorcombe comes cheaper than Bristol by a great deal—beef twopence-halfpenny a pound less, and mutton twopence, and I know I’m right, for I made particular inquiries. Why, a hundred a year in a place like that is a fortune—a perfect fortune. And then look at what you will have to do for it—next to nothing, less than nothing, I may almost say. And I’m getting an old man now, Austin—quite an old man. Ah! I don’t suppose you’ll have long to wait for my little bit of money.”

With this he coughed a hollow-sounding cough, either as a tribute of sympathy to his own infirmities, or by way of enforcing his last argument, for he had not hitherto seemed to be suffering from any particular ailment.

Austin Waters was plainly in great perplexity. For a while he sat meditating with downcast eyes, then, as though desirous of other counsel than his own, he raised his head and glanced inquiringly towards his wife. But his look went unanswered, for she was gazing

thoughtfully before her, with her downward-turned face slightly averted, so that he could see nothing of it save that it was very pale.

"Well, is it to be yes or no?" asked the visitor presently.

The nephew started, and was apparently about to speak, when all at once he heard an eager voice at his ear whisper :

"Say no—do say no."

The voice was that of Harold Maxwell, who had been watching the workings of his brother-in-law's countenance with intense anxiety—
anxiety that reached its culminating point in the words which had now half involuntarily burst from his lips.

But the words had been heard by others than Austin Waters, for whom alone they had been intended, if indeed they were intended to be heard at all.

The old man turned round briskly.

"Eh? Who said that?"

The boy lowered his eyes and blushed, with all the trepidation of a shy youth who finds himself suddenly called to account by his seniors.

"You are very free with your advice, young gentleman. What do you mean by it, pray?"

The blush on Harold's cheek deepened, but still he did not answer.

"Come, speak up, young fellow, you were ready enough with your tongue just now. And so you want him to say no, do you? and what may that be for? Because you want to keep him as poor as you are likely to be yourself, eh?"

The lad looked up proudly, his face glowing with the indignation which had at length fairly prevailed over his natural shyness.

"Because I think he would be selling himself into slavery," he answered steadily.

The old man looked at the boy, and the boy looked back again at the old man, and war was declared between them as plainly as war was ever declared by hostile glances.

Uncle Gilbert rose and pushed away his chair.

"Well, well, boys and babies have it all their own way in this house, I see. Good evening, Austin. I need not wait for your answer; you will do as you are told, of course, even if it is to throw away a fortune."

He made a step towards the door, and was evidently ready to carry his threat of departure into execution, when Austin, who had been watching the growth of the quarrel between his uncle and brother-in-law in a sort of stunned dismay, suddenly roused himself to terrified action.

"No, uncle, no, don't go yet—it was not my fault. I am ready to consent to everything, uncle, I am indeed."

"Oh! you are, are you?" said the visitor grimly, pausing on his way out. "Mind, you need not say yes unless you like. If you are not satisfied, I can find plenty others who will be."

"Oh! but I am satisfied, of course I am satisfied. Do sit down again, Uncle Gilbert, pray."

The young man's hand was laid entreatingly on Uncle Gilbert's arm, who, relaxing into a hard smile, suffered himself to be led back to his seat.

"It is quite understood there is to be no grumbling, then?" he stipulated. "You will be content to take a hundred a year for a little

while from a poor old man who is going to leave you all he has in the world?"

"Oh yes! uncle; how can you think——"

"Very well, very well, that's settled. But if you live on a hundred a year, you won't be able to throw away money with both hands, you must recollect. If you want to maintain yonder young gentleman in idleness, for instance——"

"Oh! but it had been all settled already that Harold was to leave us," interrupted Austin, with a look towards his brother-in-law which seemed to implore silence. "He has just won a scholarship at school, and is going to Oxford immediately."

"Going to Oxford! That young sprig going to Oxford!"

"Yes, uncle," answered Austin timidly. "He is a very good fellow, sir, and I'm sure you would say so if you did but know him," he added, with an uneasy feeling that it was his duty to put in a word for one who had so long been a member of his family.

"Oh! I dare say," commented Uncle Gilbert drily. "Going to Oxford, is he? Well, I'm

glad Oxford is not Chorcombe, that's all. Another cup, Mrs. Waters."

And then, his mandate being immediately obeyed, he sipped away with great apparent relish in the midst of a dead silence which all others in the room felt to be intolerably oppressive, but which they were too much under constraint to think of breaking.

Presently he remarked, tapping the cup with his spoon :

"A pretty thing for such as you to be using china like this in common. Now how did you come by these cups? A wedding-present from some idiot or other, I suppose? Wedding-presents—ugh, I've no patience with such foolery."

"We—we bought them, I think," stammered Austin.

"Bought them, did you? I didn't know you had ever had so much money to throw away. And how much may you have paid for the set, eh?"

He turned sharply towards Mrs. Waters, who, feeling his inquisitive eyes fastened on her in piercing scrutiny, brought herself to falter out :

"I forget—it is so long ago, you know—just after we were married."

He lifted up his hands in scandalised astonishment.

"She forgets! Here's pretty housekeeping! High time indeed such a couple were set to practise a little economy. And I suppose you would say you forget the price of the chairs, and the carpet, and the hearth-rug; all preposterously out of keeping with your station, allow me to remark. Why, I dare say you couldn't even tell me how much a yard you paid for those curtains of yours."

Mrs. Waters shook her head, and smiled feebly; she thought it possible he might be joking.

But Uncle Gilbert was not joking, or, if he was, he kept all the enjoyment of the joke to himself.

"What! you forget that too, do you, ma'am? Well then, you may thank your stars that at Chorcombe you will have somebody to advise you in your housekeeping who understands it better than you do. And now I must be off, for my lodgings are at the other end of the town,

and I hear those scoundrelly omnibuses charge double fares after eight. How people can put up with such imposition——Dear me, twenty minutes to eight already—no time to lose. Good-bye, Austin, you shall hear from me when I get back to Bristol. Good-bye, ma'am, and look after your bills better in future. Good-bye, young gentleman, and hark you, hadn't you better study for a doctor, as you are so fond of giving advice gratis—he! he! Now then, look sharp with the candle there, or I shall be too late."

Thus speaking, he made his way into the passage, his nephew respectfully following with a light and nervously stammering disjointed protestations of gratitude. These, however, were soon cut short by the old man's impatience; and in a minute more, with a nod and a grunted "good night," Uncle Gilbert had left the house.

Austin Waters re-entered the little parlour very staidly and quietly—so quietly that nobody could have supposed noisiness to be one of his faults. He had just been promised the reversion of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and yet somehow he did not seem by

any means inclined to be in rollicking spirits.

"You must not mind too much what he says," he began deprecatingly as he put down the candle. "He was always very odd and eccentric in his ways."

He looked towards his wife, but she did not answer. She was stooping down to arrange the disordered blankets of the empty cradle, and did not notice that she had been addressed. There was an awkward silence, and then Harold spoke, in a low hesitating voice not usual with him.

"You are really going to do as he says, Austin?"

"Certainly ; shouldn't I be a monstrous fool if I did anything else?" returned the master of the house, not without some acrimoniousness. "What! would you have me say no to an offer of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds?"

"Ah! but then, Austin——"

"And let me tell you I was very much annoyed to hear you speak as you did ; you might have done me a great injury. But never mind that so long as you don't worry me about it any more. The idea of wanting a fellow to

throw away a fortune of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds when it is to be had for nothing—perfect lunacy it would be, you know. Eh, Agnes, wouldn't it?"


Mrs. Waters looked up with a pale anxious face that showed no trace of elation at the magnificence of her prospects.

"Perhaps, dear. But then a hundred a year in the meantime is so very little, and besides——"

"Ah! but a hundred and fifty thousand is not so very little, is it?" argued her husband triumphantly.

"It is a great deal. But then, dear, we do not know how many years——"

"Well, if there is one thing I detest more than another it is that abominable trick of speculating on the chances of other people's lives," interrupted Austin, more crossly than he had yet spoken. "I shouldn't have thought it of you, Agnes, 'pon my word I shouldn't. A poor old man like that, too, who you may say has got one foot in the grave already. Didn't you see how thin and shrunk-up he looked? he reminded me of nobody so much as poor Thompson at the office



who was carried off by paralysis at twelve hours' notice. I shouldn't wonder a bit but that in two or three years——Not that I am looking forward to such a thing, of course, all I mean to say is that it is ridiculous idiotic nonsense to speak as if I had made a mistake, or to try and talk me into doing anything different. Besides, it's done now; I've promised, and what I promise I stick to."

He spoke in a raised voice which showed that he was getting seriously out of temper, and looked round with an air of angry decision. Mrs. Waters sighed and said nothing, not because she could not have found something to say had she chosen, but because she remembered that her husband had already quarrelled with his uncle for her sake. Harold also kept silence, and Austin saw that he was to have his own way without further opposition from wife or brother-in-law.

He was not naturally despotic, and softened at once on perceiving their submission.

"Come, come, Agnes, I didn't mean to vex you—you or Harry either. But, as I say, it's done now, and can't be undone, so where's the

good of fretting? At the worst it will only be a little pinching for a few years, and then— Oh! you'll be glad enough of it in the end, you'll see. Why, Agnes, cheer up, don't you know I'm doing it for your sake more than my own?—yours and the children's, bless 'em. And you, Harry my boy, don't you go and think me unkind because I didn't stand up for you more than I did, but if Uncle Gilbert chooses to take dislikes to people for nothing, what's the use of crossing him? It would only have made him fly into a passion and never look at me again, and that wouldn't have been for your good any more than mine. For when I come into my money, Harry, you shall come into it too, you may make up your mind to that. Aha! money won't be such a bad thing then, will it? Ten or twenty thousand pounds needn't be sneezed at even by the future Lord-Chancellor, eh? And that would be nothing out of a hundred and fifty, you know. Oh! you shall see it will all turn out for the best, but indeed you see it already, don't you?"

"Dear Austin!" said the boy. But he did not answer the question.


THE HEIR EXPECTANT.

CHAPTER I.

Time Tries All.

MORE than twenty-one years had passed since the evening on which the Waters family, assembled in the humble parlour of their little house in Liverpool, had received the unexpected visit of Uncle Gilbert.

It was the afternoon of a bleak March day, and again, in a yet humbler parlour this time, the Waters family sat assembled. The Waters family—for the identity of a household must be supposed to endure so long as the husband and father lives, and here was present not only the same Austin Waters who had sat at one end of the tea-table twenty-one years ago, but the same Agnes who had smiled at him so lovingly



from the other. But though the husband and wife were the same, all their surroundings were different, all the circumstances of their family life were changed. There was only one fact which, having existed through all these one-and-twenty years, and existing still, might be said to give a kind of unity to their history during the period; and even that fact, however paramount it might be in their thoughts and feelings, was after all external to themselves and their home circle.

UNCLE GILBERT WAS STILL ALIVE.

Everything else was changed. There in Liverpool their family circle had comprised a light-hearted schoolboy and three rosy-cheeked sturdy children; here at Chorcombe their sole companion was a girl who, born about three years after the transplantation of the household, was now about eighteen years of age—Emily, or Emmy as she was generally called, their daughter and only child.

Their only child; it was even so. The Austy and Aggy and baby Harry who had gladdened the first years of their married life had long ago been laid to rest in Chorcombe churchyard, smit-

ten down within a few weeks of each other by a low fever which soon after Emmy's birth had been very fatal in the village, especially in damp and ill-drained houses, and more especially when the occupants of such houses were poor and needy. And to this class, in spite of his relationship to the richest man of the place, Austin Waters emphatically belonged. A family doomed to keep up appearances on a hundred a year cannot be other than poor and needy; and even in the midst of their direst need, with one child sickening after another, and a scanty exchequer still further impoverished by the recent advent of a new baby and the slow recovery of the mother—even in this dark hour Uncle Gilbert could not be induced to add a farthing to his nephew's allowance. How Austin had got through the troubles of that time at all was a matter of surprise to those best acquainted with his difficulties; still get through them he did, with that terrible drawback of the loss of all his elder children.

Another member of the household yet remains to be accounted for, the schoolboy Harold Maxwell, who not only was never seen in it now, but whose very name was seldom if ever breath-

ed by those to whom it was once so familiar. Under this silence was shrouded one of the heaviest trials that the family had been called upon to suffer, to explain which a few words of retrospective narrative will be necessary.

One day about eighteen years ago—it was just when the husband and wife were at the commencement of their worst troubles, with a baby a few weeks old to provide for, and the elder children down with the fever—the good people of Chorcombe had a great sensation. It was whispered that old Mr. Waters up at the great house had lost some money by a forgery, and that his suspicions pointed to his nephew's brother-in-law as the delinquent.

The rumour of such a charge brought against any one personally known to them in however slight a degree must always produce a stir among the inhabitants of a place like Chorcombe—a large village rather than a town. Harold Maxwell had been but seldom seen there, having passed most of his time during the last three years at Oxford, and never spending at his sister's house more than a day or two of his vacations.

in consequence of old Mr. Waters's known antipathy to him. Nevertheless the news of the suspicion that had fallen on him travelled through the neighbourhood like wild-fire, and before the report was half a day old all the facts of the case had been elicited, so far as they were to be elicited at all, for the benefit of the community at large.

It appeared that a draft bearing the forged name of the elder Mr. Waters had been presented a few days before at a London bank where that gentleman kept an account. The money, to the amount of a hundred pounds, had been paid without question, and the fraud might have escaped detection for an indefinite time, but that the old man had at this juncture taken it into his head to withdraw his deposit from the bank, thus necessitating a balancing of accounts. Immediately on the discovery of the disparity between the bank's reckoning and the depositor's, there had been a brisk interchange of complaint and explanation, and the clerk who had paid the money on the forged document was sent down to Chorcombe to give a description of the person who had passed it. It was from this descrip-

their promised inheritance, so outrageous was the old man's anger, especially against Mrs. Waters, whom he scrupled not to accuse of having prevented her brother's return by sending him timely warning of his danger. But at last he became gradually mollified, perhaps because his sense of justice was moved by the consideration that, having published his suspicions so widely as he had, he might himself have been the means of bringing them to the delinquent's ears; or perhaps because he felt some gleam of pity for the unfortunate parents who were by this time mourning over the deaths of their children; or perhaps simply because his *amour-propre* was satisfied by the submission made to him in all things by his nephew, including the concession of his claim over the fugitive's books and other effects. However that may have been, certain it was that after a few months the relations of uncle and nephew became pretty much what they had been before; that is to say, Austin's services were put in requisition as often as they could be made available, and the hundred a year was paid in regular quarterly instalments. By degrees also old

Gilbert in his ordinary intercourse with his nephew left off harping on Harold Maxwell and his misdoings, reserving the subject for occasions of extra ill-humour as one which he had discovered to be specially painful to the younger man's feelings.

It need hardly be said that when Gilbert Waters had thus comparatively forgotten a topic once of such all-absorbing importance to him, it had long ceased to occupy the attention of even the most inveterate of the village gossips. As years passed on, the affair dwindled from the proportions of contemporary history into those of tradition, and at last a generation had sprung up who had scarcely heard of it even in the latter form. By this time there were dwellers in Chorcombe to whom the very name of Harold Maxwell was unknown, and of those that remembered it there were few who could have given an off-hand answer to the question whether he was alive or dead. For of course the subject was not one to be talked of to Mr. and Mrs. Austin Waters, and there were no others in the village who could be sup-


posed to have any accurate information of his fate.

The tale of past sorrow and bereavement, of still enduring anxiety and privation, would have told itself very plainly to any observant spectator present in that little parlour where the Waters family now sat in conclave. A little parlour, and yet as far as possible from being snug—with thread-bare carpet, old horse-hair chairs whose rusty black was here and there made more conspicuous by a patch of comparatively fresh material, naked-looking walls which a vain attempt had been made to enliven by one or two old-fashioned black-framed prints, a small and struggling fire, and a narrow ill-fitting window which rattled with every new gust that swept the dusty village street without. The scanty and uninviting remains of a frugal dinner were on the table, at one end of which sat Austin Waters, no longer noisy and ruddy and jovial-looking as of yore, but with subdued demeanour, pale face, and grizzled hair, and a gaunt frame on which his clothes seemed to hang loosely and flabbily. Opposite to

him sat his wife, on whose dejected bearing and sad anxious countenance the ravages of time and care had written themselves no less distinctly than on his own. She was still mild and lady-like as ever (lady-like in spite of the shabby old-fashioned gown in which she was arrayed, and which was as shabby and old-fashioned as was compatible with the standard of gentility imposed on the family by their tyrant), but her whole manner was pervaded by an air of depression which to any one who had known her in old days must have been very touching.

The third member of the group was the only one who did not bear the external stamp of the family poverty. A fresh round-faced maiden, with dimpled cheeks, full rosy lips, wavy light brown hair that seemed permanently tinged by a gleam of sunshine, and wide-open hazel eyes undimmed by fear or trouble—it was evident that this only child of struggling and care-worn parents had been shielded by their love and self-sacrifice from all the worst evils of their lot. The mother had borne a double share of privation that the daughter's young life might

be unclouded, and the mother's object had been attained. That the girl's spirit was still uncrushed and unbroken was apparent not only in her every look and gesture, but even in the little details of her toilet. She was dressed simply and inexpensively enough in all conscience, in a brown stuff gown that some young ladies might deem it a misfortune to have to wear; but then the gown itself and all the little accessories of collar and cuffs were disposed with a care and elaborateness which showed a mind perfectly at ease, while the arrangement of the wavy light brown hair was so ingenious, and at the same time so becoming, that to a severe critic it might have suggested coquettishness. And, sooth to say, this was a quality which some of Emmy's female friends and neighbours did not stick at attributing to her. But local scandal is always untrustworthy, and as some of the same female friends and neighbours also declared that she wasn't a bit pretty, but on the contrary rather plain than otherwise—an assertion in which they were undeniably more or less mistaken—it may be fairly hoped that one charge was as unfounded as the other.



Whatever of coquettishness there may or may not have been about Emmy under ordinary circumstances, there was certainly none of it in her manner at the present moment. A discussion was going forward in which she evidently took a deep and serious interest, her face being turned towards her father with an air of gravity and ripe wisdom prettily contrasting with its juvenile softness and roundness of outline.

"It may be true or it may not," Austin Waters was saying, "but I tell you I dare not go again to-day. If I were to inquire at the door even, he would be sure to hear of it, and there is no knowing what he might not do. Why, it was only this morning he taunted me with being in a hurry, just for asking if he had had a good night; and if he was to hear that I had been calling again—And besides, I shouldn't wonder if it is a mistake all the time; very likely he is not a bit worse than he was yesterday. When did you say John Thwaites told you?"

"About an hour ago, papa. Mamma and I met him as we were coming back from our walk,

and he said he had just heard from Dr. Plummer that Uncle Gilbert was very ill. So I suppose it really must be true that Dr. Plummer said so, for I don't see how Mr. Thwaites or anybody else could make a mistake about a thing like that."

The last words were accompanied by a slight, almost imperceptible, toss of the head, which may have been given however only by way of emphasis.

"Very likely Dr. Plummer said so," answered the father, not without a touch of querulousness in his voice. "But then did Dr. Plummer say so after ten o'clock this morning, when I saw Uncle Gilbert with my own eyes, no worse than he has been any time these six months? Anybody who didn't know him as well as I do would of course say he was very ill, lying shaking all over with palsy as he does, and so they would have said last week, or last month, or last year for that matter, but their saying so wouldn't have proved much, you see." And here the touch of querulousness became so audible that the speaker probably noticed it himself, for he went on in somewhat altered tones to inquire: "And it is

only John Thwaites who has told you anything about this, then?"

"Oh! only John Thwaites," answered the girl lightly, flinging back as she spoke one of her long curls with so becoming an air of carelessness and disdain that it was difficult to believe her altogether unconscious of it.

"You might have been a little more careful in getting the particulars out of him, I think," said Austin rather harshly.

"Perhaps we ought, papa," answered Emmy. "But we could not stand talking to him all day," and again the curl was flung back.

He got up, and made a few steps to and fro, manifestly under strong excitement.

"If I only knew what to believe—whether anything has happened since morning, that is the question. Suppose I go and ask Dr. Plummer—but no, everything is sure to be reported. I think sometimes he must set spies on me, upon my word and honour I do; he contrives to find out everything, bed-ridden as he is. And if I did the least thing to offend him I believe he wouldn't mind disappointing me even

now; yes, now, even now, after I have given up all my life to him—that is, if he was offended, you know. Ah! you would think so too if you heard the things he says sometimes.”

He shuddered, and paced the room more excitedly than ever, the eyes of his wife and daughter uneasily following him.

“He is always casting it up to me that I never would have taken his hundred a year if I had expected him to live to such an age—he likes talking about that, because he thinks he made such a good bargain. And then he keeps asking if there is any hurry, and if I can make it convenient to wait a year or two longer, and whatever I say to answer him he only grins and chuckles to himself as if it were the best joke in the world. And once—I never told you this because I tried to forget it—once when I said something about hoping to wait a great many years longer, he laughed and answered it was a good thing not to be impatient, for who could tell what disappointment might be in store after all. But then that was only to tease me, I’m sure, eh, Agnes, eh, Emmy? Only to tease me?”

"Oh yes! of course, papa," said Emmy promptly, but Mrs. Waters did not answer.

"Oh yes! of course," he repeated, coming to a standstill beside his wife's chair. "You think so too, Agnes, don't you?"

"I hope so, dear," she responded tremulously.

He looked at her with strangely troubled eyes, then said hoarsely :

"You hope so? what do you mean by that? You do not think so, then?"

"I don't know, dear. It is better not to be too confident about anything."

"You do not think so, then?"


She was silent. For another second or two he stood looking at her as though waiting for an answer, then turned abruptly on his heel, saying sharply :

"You are a fool."

"Papa, papa!" expostulated Emmy, "how can you talk like that? You dear, dear mamma," she went on, rising to throw both arms round her mother's neck, "don't mind what he says; you know he doesn't mean it. My own sweet mamma, give me a kiss—there."

Mrs. Waters smiled, and kissed her daughter fondly.

It was very pleasant to her to have those soft arms clinging about her, and to feel herself so loved as she knew she was by their owner. And yet, if the truth must be told, in the very warmth of the girl's demonstrations there was a tone of protection which, had Mrs. Waters been less accustomed to it, might have jarred upon her feelings as something like patronage. For the fact was that Emmy, while loving her mother dearly and tenderly, was half unconsciously disposed to underrate that mother's social importance as compared with her father's. Her father was the nephew and chosen heir of the great man of the village (for, penurious as he was, Uncle Gilbert kept up a sort of style which vindicated his claim to lord it over his neighbours), the man whom, if nobody loved, everybody respected, and whom Emmy in particular, though no fonder of him than the others, had been brought up to regard as the arbiter of her destinies. Her father therefore, representing the wealth and gentility of the family, shone in her eyes with a reflected glory not



shared by her mother, who had no rich relations, and on whom the great man of the village notoriously looked with disfavour. And not only this; her mother might be said in an indirect way to represent the disgrace of the family, inflicted on it long ago by the crime of that dreadful Uncle Harold whose very name was under such a ban that Emmy might never have heard it but for sundry taunting allusions made by the old man when he was in more than usually bad humour. So, having got the notion into her head that her mother was somehow under a cloud, it was natural that she should allow her fondness to assume something of a protecting tone.

She continued standing by Mrs. Waters's chair, putting forth her neat little hands caressingly to smooth the soft bands of silver-streaked hair over which she bent.

"Not but what I think, mamma dear, you were quite mistaken," she went on, glancing up at her father, who still paced the room in angry disquietude. "How you can imagine that Uncle Gilbert could act so dishonourably after all his promises—I know he is very unkind some-

times, but he values his character as a gentleman too much to think of such a thing for a moment, I am sure."

Perhaps it was not everybody who would have credited Uncle Gilbert with having the character of a gentleman to value. But he was rich, and it was a weakness of Emmy's to take for granted that all rich people were gentlemen or ladies. And if any are disposed to blame her for this undue worship of wealth, it must be remembered that she had seen wealth worshipped and sacrificed to from her childhood up.

Her father caught eagerly at her words.

"Of course, of course!" he cried, coming once more to a halt. "Why, Agnes, you see, the very child understands about it better than you do. His character as a gentleman, just so. Go on, Emmy, go on. His character as a gentleman."

"Yes, papa, that is my firm opinion," resumed Emmy, not without some sententiousness of manner, for she was gratified by this appreciation of her logic. "Whatever Uncle Gilbert may be, he is too much of a gentleman to break his word when you have given him no just

cause of offence. And so, dear papa, and dear mamma too, you may both make your minds perfectly easy."

She spoke so coaxingly, and with so pretty an air of conviction withal, that her father's brow visibly cleared, and even her mother felt somewhat re-assured. Perhaps the girl herself had an idea that she showed to advantage, for she put up her hand to give an adjusting touch to her collar, at the same time glancing across the room at one of the old-fashioned black-framed prints already mentioned, one of which, being covered with glass and hanging in a dark corner, was capable of doing duty on occasion as a substitute for a mirror.

She seemed about to follow up her argument, and might probably have held forth some time longer, when, her eyes having momentarily wandered towards the window, her attention was effectually diverted from the matter in hand.

"There is Uncle Gilbert's man. Is he coming to us, I wonder?"

The question was almost immediately answered by a ring at the bell, and, with a sudden

flush of his pale cheeks, Austin Waters hurried into the passage to the street-door. On opening it, he did not stop to ask questions, but, apparently too much agitated to speak, beckoned the new-comer inside, and led the way back to the parlour where his wife and daughter waited in anxious expectation.

The messenger was a young man of rather rough and rustic appearance for a gentleman's servant (he had been driving pigs three months before), dressed in a suit which did not fit him, and which since it was new had been worn by some half-dozen predecessors in his master's service, for the *personnel* of Uncle Gilbert's household was constantly shifting. There was a brief pause, during which he stood twirling his hat in a way which would have put his employer in a fever of alarm for the nap, and then, finding that everybody was waiting for him to speak, he blurted out :

"If you please, master, the old master wants to see you d'rectly. He's bin took worse, and doctor says as how he must go off this time."

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Waters spoke. The news which they had expected for so many

years, and had thought to hear long ere this, had taken them by surprise now that it had really come. Both husband and wife were deadly pale, and the former was trembling violently. The silence was at last broken by Emmy.

“He is very ill then? How did it come on? how long ago? It must have been very sudden.”

“It wur about twelve o’clock, miss, ’cause just afore he’d been going on at Mrs. Muggridge for being late with his beef-tea; we thought he’d ha’ bin out of bed a’most in his tantrums. So she got it ready in double quick time, but when she brought it, and he tried to sit up to take it, he couldn’t, and then he tried to speak, and couldn’t speak plain. We see’d d’rectly it wur another stroke, and Mrs. Muggridge she wur for sending at once to tell you, but he kep’ shaking his head and trying to say as plain as he could he’d be better soon. He wurn’t even for seeing the doctor, and wouldn’t only we fetched him unbeknown and he couldn’t help hisself. Well, doctor he pulled a long face, and said it wur a bad job, but master he answered very cross

he wur agoing to get well for all that, and wouldn't hear of us telling you nor nobody else. Howsomever, he has kep' on getting deader and deader all up his side, and as cold as a lump o' lead, and doctor he called again just now, and said it wur a worser job nor he thought, and wouldn't it be better to send for Mr. Austin, and master he seemed to understand it wur all up, for he said yes and let him be quick about it, and then he went into a doze and doctor thinks p'raps he'll go off so."

Having delivered himself thus with some difficulty and with great detriment to his hat, which he kept twirling about all the time as an aid to his eloquence, the narrator came to a full stop, glad to have done his part.

"Poor Uncle Gilbert! how very sad!" sighed Emmy.

And though some people might have thought the sigh hypocritical under the circumstances, it was probably quite genuine. Emmy had not suffered from Uncle Gilbert as her father and mother had suffered, and could afford to compassionate him at this supreme crisis.

Austin Waters suddenly roused himself;

Emmy's remark seemed to remind him of something he had forgotten.

"Ah! very sad," he echoed, but it was in a husky constrained voice quite different from Emmy's. "Poor Uncle Gilbert, I am afraid—— Give me my hat, child, there. Now then, my good fellow, I am quite ready."

And in another moment Austin Waters was out of the house and on his way to the old man's bedside, leaving his wife and daughter to await in uneasy suspense what news he might bring back. Would he or would he not return as Uncle Gilbert's heir?

CHAPTER II.

Visitors.

THE mother and daughter thus left alone sat for some time without speaking. At last Emmy raised her bright eyes from the floor, and turned them towards her mother with an inquiring look rather at variance with the confidence which she immediately went on to express :

“ It will all come right, mamma ; I am sure it will.”

“ God grant that it may, my darling. If it does not, I don’t know what will become of us.”

Emmy sat looking before her very thoughtfully. Presently, without raising her eyes this time, she resumed hesitatingly :

“ I shouldn’t be nervous about it for a moment, only Uncle Gilbert is so very strict and severe, and I am afraid he is prejudiced against

us about—on account of—that affair with—because of—of Uncle Harold, you know.”

She sank her voice as she came to the forbidden name, and glanced deprecatingly at her mother, as though almost fearing the effect of words which were so unfamiliar that it was a sort of experiment to utter them. Mrs. Waters had turned a shade paler, and for a minute her breath seemed to come and go more quickly than usual; but when at last she spoke it was with such composure that Emmy felt relieved of half her timidity.

“I dare say you are right, Emmy.”

“Yes, he thinks of it still sometimes, I am sure, and that is the only thing that frightens me,” continued the girl, speaking with more rapidity now that the ice was broken. “If he should take it into his head to visit upon us—Ah! how cruel and unjust it would be, and yet I am almost afraid sometimes. It is very hard. Just as if anybody could help having bad relations, just as if it was papa’s fault, or yours, or mine, to have a wicked person connected——”

“Emmy!” cried her mother.

Emmy had been growing warmer and warmer in her subject, but the tone of mingled appeal and command in which she was addressed brought her instantly to a stop. Her mother's face wore an expression of positive suffering.

"Remember it is my brother you are speaking of," said Mrs. Waters faintly as their eyes met.

"I am so sorry, mamma," faltered Emmy. "But after all these years I did not think you cared——"

"It is my brother," repeated Mrs. Waters.

Emmy dropped her eyes penitently and did not answer. She was vexed with herself for having given her mother pain, and perhaps a little vexed with her mother also for being so easily put to pain. For Emmy had never known what it was to have a brother or sister of her own, and secretly thought it very strange that her mamma should be capable of feeling any remnant of regard for a person who had caused such disgrace and misfortune to his family as had been wrought by Harold Maxwell.

For some time she sat silent, pondering on what appeared to her so curious an anomaly in

her mother's character. From this her thoughts gradually wandered to other, though kindred, topics of speculation, in which at last she got so interested that, very timidly and cautiously, she ventured upon another remark.

"I suppose you don't know anything about Uncle Harold now, mamma?"

Such an inquiry surely argued Emmy to be in a more than usually suspicious mood, seeing that, only a few weeks before, she had heard old Gilbert Waters put the same question to her father and receive a solemn assurance in the negative.

These repeated references to her brother were evidently very painful to Mrs. Waters.

"Know anything of him!" she answered in some agitation, "what should we know of him? Emmy, what are you thinking of, what——"

"Oh! it was very ridiculous of me certainly," assented Emmy, suddenly struck by the absurdity of the question. "I only just asked for curiosity, for of course I knew already it was quite impossible—indeed I heard papa say so only the other day. I wonder how Uncle Gilbert is."

And thus the subject of Harold Maxwell was dropped for the present. Not that Emmy could not have found plenty more to say about it, but the theme was one on which she had from childhood been accustomed to restrain her curiosity, some of the worst scoldings she had ever incurred having been provoked from her father by attempts to find out something concerning this unknown uncle of hers.

The conversation fell back on the old dreary topic of Gilbert Waters and the confidence which was or was not to be placed in his good faith, when a brisk knock sounding at the street-door caused the girl to start up with an exclamation that was almost joyful.

“Miss Egerton! I know her knock.”

And with eager alacrity Emmy ran out to open the door.

“Why, Emmy!” said a clear ringing voice.

“Oh! Miss Egerton, it is such a comfort to see you! Come and speak to mamma.”

With these words Emmy ushered in the new-comer, who, going straight up to Mrs. Waters, gave her a hearty kiss.

“Dear Mrs. Waters! Now for goodness sake

keep up your spirits, or I shall run away again directly."

Mrs. Waters looked up and smiled, half comforted already. There was something so fresh and cordial in the speaker's voice and manner that her presence in that gloomy household had something of the effect of a breeze of morning air let into a sick-chamber.

The visitor was a young lady who might safely be called graceful, for her figure was tall and well-formed, and moreover characterized by a certain undulating elegance of movement that gave an air of ease to all she did. That she could correctly be styled beautiful, or even pretty, was not quite so self-evident, and perhaps it would not have occurred to anybody seeing her for the first time to think so. Probably, however, this was not so much the fault of her features as of her complexion, which, though perfectly clear and smooth, was as dark as a brunette's, while it lacked, except on rare occasions of excitement, the ordinary brunette's richness of colour. On those rare occasions she would perhaps have commanded admiration even at first sight, for her features were for the

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most part good and sufficiently regular, and her face was always lighted up by a pair of large grey eyes which, contrasting strikingly with her almost black hair and long dark eye-lashes, would under any circumstances have redeemed her appearance from the charge of common-place. She has been called a young lady, but she was some years past her first youth, being now some five or six-and-twenty years of age.

"It was so kind of you to come," said Mrs. Waters gratefully. "Have you heard——"

"Of old Mr. Waters being so ill—oh yes! I have been shopping in the village, and heard all about it; that is why I am here. I thought you might like to see a friend."

"Dear Miss Egerton," said Emmy, "you are always so good. Won't you take a chair? And do let me put down your umbrella."

As Emmy hovered about the visitor with these little offers of service, the most casual observer might have seen that she was actuated by very sincere liking and affection. Yet it might also have been noticed that with liking and affection there was mingled a certain de-

ference which to those who best knew her would have suggested that Miss Egerton must be a person of considerable consequence in the world.

And indeed in the little world of Chorcombe Miss Egerton was a person of very great consequence, being neither more nor less than the largest landed proprietor in the neighbourhood. All that great estate lying a little way westward of Chorcombe, and known as Egerton Park, was hers to dispose of as she would ; so that if Uncle Gilbert by virtue of his wealth was the great man of the village, Miss Egerton, by virtue of wealth and social importance combined, was the great lady of the whole district, a position which she had occupied during the past three years. Only during three years, for she had not been born to her present dignities, or even brought up to expect them, and this circumstance was generally held to account for sundry peculiarities in her modes of life and thinking which had procured her with some people a character for eccentricity, and certainly distinguished her from most young ladies moving in county society.

And here a glance at Miss Egerton's antecedents will not be out of place.

She was the only child of a younger son of the Egerton family, who—having irrevocably offended his relations by marrying a penniless governess, and dying when his daughter was still in early youth—had left her with hardly any other resource for her maintenance and that of an invalid mother than what a good education and her own industry might supply. At the age of sixteen Olivia Egerton was supporting herself, and contributing to the support of her mother, by teaching from morning to night in a boarding-school; and a boarding-school teacher she continued to be for years without assistance or recognition from any of her father's relations, who for the rest were scarcely aware of her existence. At last, some years after she had been left alone in the world by the loss of her mother, the startling intelligence reached her through the family lawyer that the stumble of a horse in the hunting-field and the consequent death of an unknown cousin had made her mistress of Egerton Park and some ten thousand a year in rents. The intel-

ligence was very startling, for at Clare Court, about ten miles from Chorcombe, lived another branch of the family, which, though younger than that represented by Olivia, had always kept up friendly relations at Egerton Park, so that neither Olivia nor any one else had doubted that the property would be bequeathed to the Clare Court people in the failure of direct heirs. And so it unquestionably would have been if the last owner had troubled himself to bequeath it to anybody, but he had been a young man, full of life and thinking rather of marriage than of death, besides which the existence of Olivia was so utterly ignored and forgotten that the possibility of her heiress-ship had never been so much as taken into account. Thus it came to pass that, aided by her very obscurity and insignificance, the boarding-school teacher suddenly found herself metamorphosed into a great county magnate.

She was considered to bear her honours very well on the whole, though, as has been said, there were sundry peculiarities about her which were thought to need apology. For instance, it is undoubtedly a great peculiarity in a

wealthy heiress to go on living with nobody but a paid lady-companion of middle age, when she might choose a husband among half the handsome young men of the county ; and Olivia, though mixing much in society, and even entering into its enjoyments with apparent zest, had set her face steadily against all the admirers and would-be suitors by whom she was beleaguered. Then again she was a little more frank and free-spoken in her manners, a little more independent and self-helpful in her ways, than was quite consistent with the standard of propriety prescribed by provincial chaperons. She was more often seen on foot than in her carriage, more often alone than with her companion, and delighted in taking long rambles up hill and down dale without regard to dust or mud. It was in the course of these solitary walks that, soon after her first arrival in the neighbourhood, she had gradually made the acquaintance of Mrs. Waters and Emmy, first passing them with a friendly nod, then stopping to say good day, and at last engaging them in long confidential chats. She had taken a great fancy to Emmy at a very early period of their friend-

ship, and, sorry to see the girl's education neglected—as in the circumstances of her parents it necessarily was, so far at least as accomplishments were concerned—had offered to send her to school at her own expense. But much as Mr. and Mrs. Waters might have liked to close with this proposal, they dared not listen to it for a moment, knowing that old Gilbert would have furiously resented their acceptance of what he would have considered charity from a stranger. It was therefore ultimately settled that Emmy should go pretty frequently up to Egerton House to let Miss Egerton hear her play and to sketch the park trees; the practical meaning of this being that Miss Egerton constituted herself Emmy's unpaid teacher in music and drawing. For nearly three years this arrangement had continued in full force, and Emmy, having been an apt pupil, was now fairly proficient in both accomplishments. She had really therefore some reason to regard Miss Egerton as a friend to be loved, no less than as a great lady to be looked up to.

“You are a good child, Emmy,” said the visitor, smiling kindly at the neat little figure that

fluttered about her. "You are always glad to see me, I know, though I do make such a fuss about perspective."

"Oh yes! indeed I am always glad, Miss Egerton. And to-day especially; papa is gone to Uncle Gilbert's, and we are so dull and miserable, you can't think. And then mamma is making herself so dreadfully anxious and unhappy; we needed somebody to come and argue her out of it."

"I am ready to argue to any extent, my dear, but you must give me my subject first. What is your mamma making herself so anxious about?"

"She is afraid of Uncle Gilbert's breaking his word and leaving his money to somebody else," answered Emmy, looking slightly shame-faced. "Oh! dear Miss Egerton, we are not mercenary, but after all we have gone through we can't help thinking about it. Only, as I tell her, he never could be so dishonourable, could he now, could he? So it is quite absurd to frighten ourselves, eh?"

"It is always quite absurd to frighten oneself about money, Emmy. It makes uncommonly little real difference."

"No, but seriously——" began Emmy.

"Seriously, my dear Emmy, and seriously, my dear Mrs. Waters—I never was more in earnest in my life. You wish for this money yourselves, and therefore I wish it for you, but I seriously think it quite possible that you might be better without it than with it."

"Oh! Miss Egerton!" remonstrated Emmy.

"If we had only enough to live on——" faltered Mrs. Waters.

"Yes, enough, that would be best of course, but when the question is between too much and too little I am not at all sure that too little has the worst of it; and mind, I ought to know, for I've tried both. When I had too little, I had to work hard to make, and now that I have too much I have to work hard to spend, that's all. No, that is not quite all either; when people were kind to me then, I knew they meant it, but when they are kind to me now, I am pretty sure they are only thinking of my money. Ah! Emmy child, if you are afraid of disappointment, let it be a comfort to you to think that then at all events your friends really would be your friends."

But Emmy was not to be comforted so easily in view of the dread contingency which Miss Egerton seemed to contemplate, and only shook her head dolefully.

“Ah! if I could only know that of my friends!” went on Miss Egerton—and here there was a touch of bitterness in the clear ringing voice not natural to it. “I know it of you and your mother, I am sure I do, but I believe that out of this room there is not a creature in the world that cares a straw about me apart from my rents and banker’s book. And yet so many dear friends as I have—oh! you would hardly credit how many there are, and what pretty things they say; if I thought such things could be said to me for my own sake I should be in a seventh heaven of delight and self-complacency. But then unfortunately I know that money is very attractive, and I am also quite aware that I myself am not attractive in the least.”

She made a little break, and looked at her hearers as though expecting them to say something in the way of polite acquiescence, or possibly of still more polite contradiction. But

though they might very well have taken the opportunity of putting in a compliment if they had chosen, and this without by any means compromising their veracity, they were so much engrossed in their own anxieties that they never thought of answering a word. So, after waiting an instant, Miss Egerton went on again with a slight sigh.

“Yes, you see that is all the good my money has done me—to make me despise the world and its professions. But never mind, Emmy, that needn’t be your case, you know; you have found out already that it is quite possible for people to like you for your own sake. Ah! you may think yourself a lucky girl, for if ever there was a truer, honester, manlier young fellow than that John Thwaites——”

“John Thwaites, indeed!” said Emmy, tossing her head with superb disdain, but at the same time turning very red. “The idea of that creature John Thwaites——”

“No now, Emmy, whatever you do, don’t despise him. If you can’t like him as well as he likes you, you can’t, and there is an end of it, though it is my private opinion——but

never mind, I dare say I should only get a scolding for saying what my private opinion is. Only whatever you do, don't give yourself airs, and pretend to look down on him—not even if Uncle Gilbert leaves you every penny of his money—for he doesn't deserve it. No, take the advice of an old woman, for you know I am an old woman compared to you ——”

Here there was another little break, which might have given Emmy an opportunity of putting in a word, but she was too much occupied in a pouting examination of the hem of her pocket-handkerchief to attend to anything else, and Miss Egerton resumed :

“Take the advice of an old woman, and be thankful that you have been able to win an honest man's love without money to help you. For he loves you with all his heart, Emmy, I am sure, and oh ! when you think of that, how fortunate you may count yourself, and how little you need care for the paltry money that Uncle Gilbert may or may not leave you !”

Emmy was as red as fire by this time, but kept examining her handkerchief so persistently that hardly anything of her face could be

seen. She did not speak for some time after Miss Egerton had finished, but at last, finding that an answer was expected, she managed to bring out a few words, with a careful avoidance, however, of John Thwaites.

"You seem to make quite sure that we are going to be disappointed, Miss Egerton."

"I cannot be quite sure, dear. But I want to make you feel that it is not of so much consequence as you appear to think."

"Not of consequence! What! when perhaps we are going to be left without a farthing in the world!"

"That is the dreadful part of it," said Mrs. Waters mournfully. "It is not because I want to be so very rich, I am sure, but when I think how destitute and helpless—and the blow too that it would be to my poor husband—Oh! don't despise me, but indeed I cannot help it."

She covered her face with her hands, unable to restrain her tears at the picture of desolation which her fancy had conjured up. Miss Egerton sat looking at her very tenderly, then rose somewhat abruptly, exclaiming:

“What a Job’s comforter I am, to be sure! it is high time you were rid of me. Dear Mrs. Waters, I beg a thousand pardons; I wanted to prepare you for the worst, and I have done it a great deal more effectually than I intended. Now good-bye, and let us think of nothing but the best, only if the worst should really come, remember” (here she lowered her voice, and, approaching Mrs. Waters to take leave, spoke the words almost into her ear), “remember I am what they call rich, and I would as soon be poor if my best friends won’t let me be of a little use to them. Good-bye, and God bless you!”

With these words, and a kiss warmly impressed on the poor lady’s cheek, Miss Egerton turned to go, followed into the little passage by Emmy, who, in spite of the lecture about John Thwaites, hung about the visitor as affectionately as ever, and parted from her with evident reluctance.

“Good-bye, dear Miss Egerton. How we are ever to thank you for all your kindness—”

“Oh! nonsense, child, don’t speak about that. There, kiss me and let me go—but stop a mo-

ment first; promise me you will think a little of what I have said about poor John Thwaites."

"Oh! as for that," said Emmy, shaking her curls, "really——" Here she opened the door with a great clatter which caused her remaining words, if any, to be lost.

"Oh! you want me to go now that I have begun again on John Thwaites, do you! Well, I'll please you, child, and I think you'll try to please me a little too, especially as I believe it will be pleasing yourself into the bargain. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Emmy with very hot cheeks, but not otherwise taking any notice of what had gone before, and even forcing herself, in spite of her hot cheeks, to stand at the door just as usual to look after Miss Egerton as she passed through the tiny ten-foot-square garden and up the village street.

But hardly had Miss Egerton got twenty yards beyond the garden-gate, when, turning hastily out of a side-street, there almost knocked against her a young man, who, having received from the heiress in passing a particularly friendly nod, immediately afterwards caught sight of

Emmy and came hurrying towards where she stood.

Emmy gave another shake to her curls as though gathering confidence for an encounter, and then, scorning retreat, set herself to await the young man's approach with the most perfect appearance of unconcern that she could summon up under the circumstances. It must be admitted that her position was one of considerable embarrassment, for she was standing on the doorstep in full view of anybody who might be passing in the street, and the person now coming towards her was no other than that creature John Thwaites.

A word here about this John Thwaites. He was clerk in a large paper-mill near Chorcombe, where he had consequently come to live a year or two before. It happened that where he lodged he was a near neighbour of Mr. and Mrs. Waters, and near neighbours in a place like Chorcombe always get to know each other more or less. By this time he had formed a tolerably intimate friendship with the family, and, as has been shown, was suspected of feeling a good deal more than friendship for one

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member of it. For the rest, he was a personable young fellow enough, with well-knit figure of middle size, open good-natured face which was manly in spite of fresh complexion and fair hair, round honest-looking blue eyes, and a frank straightforward manner only marred occasionally in the presence of ladies, and especially in the presence of Emmy, by a little too much of shyness.

In his fear lest Emmy should re-enter the house without waiting for him, he came up so quickly that he was quite out of breath as he swung open the garden-gate.


"Miss Waters!" he cried panting.

By this time, except for her cheeks, Emmy was as cool as could be desired.

"Ah! Mr. Thwaites!" she said, with a careless elevation of the eyebrows as though she had only just become aware that such a person existed.

"I—I beg your pardon. But—but I thought that you might like to know—that you ought to know, that is—Since I saw you this morning I have been making inquiries, and I find it is quite true about old Mr. Waters. In fact, I

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took the liberty of calling at Dr. Plummer's on purpose, and they told me he must be in great danger, for Dr. Plummer had been over to see him again, and was there now. So as I thought perhaps your father didn't know, I came running all the way——"

"You are very kind," answered Emmy, with a little bow. "But papa was sent for some time ago, thank you."

"Oh!" said the young man, looking a little crestfallen to find that he had been of no use after all.

"Yes," said Emmy, smoothing down a refractory fold in a dandy little apron that she wore. "What a windy day this is!"

"Yes, rather—very much so. I am afraid I am keeping you in the cold, Miss Waters."

"It is rather cold, certainly," acquiesced Emmy. "I suppose you don't want to see mamma?"

"N—no, thank you," said poor John, rather reluctantly, for in truth there was nothing he would have liked better than to be asked to enter. "I—I hope I have not kept you in the cold."

"Oh! don't mention it, Mr. Thwaites."

"Thank you. Then I will say good-bye, Miss Waters."

"Good-bye," said Emmy, looking very hard at some pigeons that were circling round the chimney-tops of the opposite houses—so hard that for a second or two she did not see the hand which the young man ventured timidly to extend. She saw it at last, and of course had to put out her hand too—what could she have done else?

"Good-bye," he said, taking her hand. He looked at her for an instant, and then—apparently forgetting to let her hand go, for he still held it—added: "I suppose things will be very different when I see you next, Miss Emmy. Your father will be a rich man, and you will be a great lady."

"I don't know about that," answered Emmy, making a slight effort to liberate herself, which however the stupid creature did not seem so much as conscious of. "Some people think that perhaps Uncle Gilbert may forget us altogether, but of course I can't tell."

• "Of course not, Miss Emmy. Well, I can

only say I wish you every good fortune."

"Thank you," said Emmy, making another and more vigorous effort to get back her hand (for what could the people over the way be thinking?). It was, however, still held fast.

"But—but—I hope you won't be angry with me for saying so—if it should turn out different—it would be very selfish of me of course—but—but if it did, I should be—in fact, I should be glad rather than sorry. You know what I mean."

Having taken heart to say thus much, he took heart also to give her hand a great squeeze, and then, dismayed at his own audacity, turned away without waiting for an answer, and posted down the village street so rapidly that he almost seemed to be in flight.

Emmy got into the house and shut the door as quickly as she could. But she did not go immediately back to her mother, stopping a minute or two in the dark passage to arrange her apron and adjust her curls and otherwise recover from the flutter into which the young man's effrontery had thrown her.

"The idea!" she murmured poutingly to her-

self as she recalled the atrocity of his parting words.

But even as she thought of them she found the pout relaxing into a smile in spite of herself. She could not help feeling that, after all, the loss of Uncle Gilbert's money might not be so very dreadful.

CHAPTER III.

The Clare Court Cousin.

MEANWHILE Miss Egerton was making the best of her way home. As she went up the quaint little village street her progress was a good deal impeded by the necessity of returning the salutations which, as a great potentate of the neighbourhood, she received from almost every one she met; but soon the houses began to be less and less thickly set, and her attention was gradually relieved from this strain. At last, having passed a few outlying cottages and farm-buildings, she found herself in a country road bordered only by leafless trees and hedges through which constant glimpses were to be had of the fields beyond, and accelerating her pace she pushed briskly forward, with evident pleasure in the keen March wind that whistled

about her, if not exactly in the dust with which it came accompanied. So much was she absorbed in enjoyment of her walk that she scarcely noticed a clatter of horse-hoofs which presently sounded behind her, and was quite startled on hearing a voice say :

“Why, Olivia!”

She turned her head, so much surprised that it was a moment before she recognised in the well-mounted rider who had just reined up at her side her cousin, the son and heir of the Eger-tons at Clare Court.

“Dear me! is that you? How do you do, Randal?”

“I was just coming over to see you,” he said, bending from his horse to shake hands. “I am so glad not to have missed you. You will allow me the honour of escorting you home?”

“There is no occasion to trouble you or your horse to keep pace with me,” said the young lady. “Ride on to my house; you will not have to wait long.”

“Ah! but I intend to have the pleasure of walking with you,” was the gallant reply. “Here, James,” he continued, addressing a ser-

vant who just then rode up, "look after Viscount."

"Oh! pray do not trouble yourself; I can walk home by myself quite well."

"I would not lose such an opportunity for the world," answered the cavalier, and proceeded to dismount without allowing time for further remonstrance.

It will be seen from this meeting of the cousins that the family at Clare Court had been magnanimous enough to take their humble relative into favour since her promotion to Egerton Park, in spite of the disappointment which her heiress-ship had inflicted upon themselves. Very magnanimous such conduct surely was, for the Clare Court property was not only much smaller than the Egerton Park estate, but was said to be heavily mortgaged; so that, for people with a position in the county to keep up and a large family of daughters to portion off, the loss of such an inheritance as had fallen to their obscure cousin was no light misfortune. Indeed there were not wanting scandal-mongers who whispered that they could not have reconciled themselves to the calamity with so good a grace

but for the hope of retrieving it by a match between the new mistress of Egerton Park and their son Randal—a suspicion confirmed by the assiduity of the young man's attentions to the heiress on all public occasions. How far the heiress was disposed to encourage these attentions was another question, answered differently in different quarters. On the one hand it was certain that Randal, with his tall military-looking figure, fine dark eyes and black silken beard and moustache, had everything to ensure his success with any ordinary young lady whom he might set himself to fascinate, especially a young lady whom he had the advantage of being able to approach on terms of cousinly intimacy. But then on the other hand it was equally certain that Miss Egerton, if indeed he had any such view with regard to her, was not an ordinary young lady at all.

In another moment Randal had joined his cousin on the foot-path, while the servant trotted on with the two horses, to lead the way at a discreet distance in front.

"Pray take my arm, Olivia," was his first overture.

"You are very kind," said Olivia, "but really I think I can manage better by myself. How are Mr. and Mrs. Egerton?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Egerton!" echoed the young man petulantly. "Good Heavens, Olivia! what a cold artificial way of speaking! Can't you call them uncle and aunt?"

"I am sure I beg your pardon; I am always forgetting. But you see it is so lately that I have had an opportunity of calling them anything at all—it is only natural I should make mistakes sometimes."

Randal slightly coloured and did not answer, so Olivia went on:

"And your sisters, I hope they are all quite well, and caught no cold at Mrs. Wrentmore's ball? By the way, what a pleasant evening that was!"

"Very pleasant indeed." He paused as though for reflection; then drew a long sigh and added: "You seemed to enjoy it very much, at all events, with such a lot of fellows as there were dangling about you. I scarcely got near you all evening."

"Oh! Randal, how can you say so? I danced

with you twice, and really I think that ought to satisfy you."

"Satisfy me!" he grumbled. "What! and you talking and laughing all evening with a pack of coxcombical toadies and fortune-hunters who can no more appreciate you——"

"Stop a minute, Randal. If you are kind enough to be afraid of my head being turned by the nonsense of those coxcombical toadies and fortune-hunters as you call them, I am much obliged to you, but you may set your mind entirely at rest. I am not taken in by a single one of all their compliments, and am perfectly aware that but for my money I am as plain and unattractive a person as ever set foot in a ball-room."

He started in scandalised horror.

"Plain! unattractive! you—Olivia! Ah! it you could only look into my heart, and see the impression——Why, you are all beauty and attractiveness together; you are all——Now Olivia, what are you angry at?"

He saw her looking at him with cold eyes and curling lip, and wondered how he could possibly have offended her. The fact was, she

was thinking how differently the same proposition which he had met with such extravagant contradiction had been received a while ago when made in the presence of real and disinterested friends.

“Angry! I am not angry in the least—how could I be angry with such a pretty speech? All beauty and attractiveness together—how delightful! and yet, made up of such commonplace materials as I am, it is rather strange too. Let me see, I must be something like my namesake in ‘Twelfth Night,’ I suppose, for I really think I possess all her perfections—item, two lips indifferent red; item, two eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin—dear me, how gratifying!”

Randal pulled his long whiskers with a puzzled air; he was not very deeply read, and had not the slightest idea what she was talking about.

“Well, so you might be gratified if you knew how people admire you—really and truly admire you, I mean. And by Jove, it would be odd if they didn’t, for wherever you go there

isn't a girl fit to hold a candle to you, in looks or anything else, of course."

"What! you really think so, Randal? Why, then those nice young men were not flattering after all—I must consider the matter seriously. Which should you say was the most eligible?—Colonel Crawford, or Captain Fane, or Mr. Neville, or Mr.——"

"Olivia, Olivia, do you want to drive me mad? A set of fawning wretches like those—do you think they can possibly care for anything but your money; do you imagine——"

Olivia turned her face full upon him.

"Dear me! this is very odd. You tell me in one breath that I am all beauty and attractiveness, the loveliest creature in the room on all occasions; and in the next you say that it is utterly impossible for Colonel Crawford, or Captain Fane, or Mr. Neville, or Mr. anybody else to care for anything about me but my money. What am I to believe?"

The young man bit his lip; he was wont rather to pique himself on his wit, but somehow with Olivia he always felt that he was made to look like a fool.

"Come now, Olivia, it isn't fair just because you are so clever——"

"Oh! it is to be clever instead of beautiful now, is it?"

"Clever and beautiful too, you know you are. The cleverest and most beautiful girl in the county, come."

"You do me great honour, Mr. Egerton."

"Mr. Egerton! There you go again! So cold and unkind as it sounds. I'm sure I always call you by your Christian name."

"I can't deny that," said Olivia.

"Well, it's only right between relations, isn't it? I declare I think sometimes you forget all about our being cousins."

"I am always quite ready to treat you as a cousin," she answered, but there was a slight emphasis on the last word which seemed as though she wished to limit the construction that he might place on the admission.

"But never as anything else, you mean?" he said bitterly.

"That is what I meant, certainly."

"Olivia, this is cruel. If you knew with

what emotions I sought you to-day, with what a full heart——”

“Now pray, Randal, don’t begin with that again.”

“What! you won’t even listen! I have come all these miles on purpose to declare my feelings, and you stop me before I begin to speak.”

“What is the use of your speaking when we both know the answer beforehand?”

“But you might at least hear me; you might give me a chance——”

“There is no chance whatever—absolutely none.”

“None!” He walked moodily on for a second or two, then, switching with his riding-whip at the twigs of the hedgerow, resumed with a profoundly melancholy air :

“At least you will let me hope that some day I may find your heart less——”

“You need not hope for anything that has to do with my heart. Old maids have no hearts, and if ever there was a confirmed old maid in the world I am one.”

"Pish, Olivia! To talk like that with your beauty and accomplishments——"

"Randal, as a favour I beg that this subject may be dropped."

She spoke so seriously that he was afraid to persevere further for the present, and merely drew another long sigh.

They had now reached a curiously carved old stone archway which was one of the approaches to Egerton Park, and Olivia stopped to undo the gate. But Randal did not seem inclined to enter, and held out his hand to say good-bye.

"What! won't you come in?" said Olivia.

"I cannot," he answered gloomily. "You will not let me speak of what I came to speak about, and I am not capable at present of talking of anything else."

"Well, whenever you do find yourself capable of talking of something else, I can only say that you will always find a welcome."

"Some other time," he murmured, "when I am calmer and stronger——"

"At that other time I shall be most happy to see you. So now good-bye."

"Good-bye," answered Randal in low sad accents, and beckoned to his servant, who had stationed himself with the horses at a little distance from the gate. In a minute more the rejected suitor was again in the saddle, riding disconsolately back in the direction of Clare Court, and thinking :

"Was there ever such obstinacy? What would she have—a title, I suppose, but I fancy she'll find herself out there; rich lords don't let themselves go cheap, and I think she is too long-headed to take a bankrupt one. Did I make any mistake, I wonder—I tried to lay it on thick enough, goodness knows, but some women are so fond of praise—Well, I have failed again, but I will succeed some day—I am more determined than ever. Confound it, there's something about her so uncommonly—not that she's exactly pretty, of course, but there's a sort of piquancy and flavour about her—and then, considering how exactly the property would suit—Provoking creature! But I'll bring her to book yet, see if I don't."

He might have been less sanguine of success if he could have seen the smile, half of con-

tempt, half of bitterness, with which Olivia looked after him as he rode away—a smile which still played about her lips as she walked up the avenue to the house, and which had not quite faded even when she found herself in her own chamber.

“All beauty and attractiveness together. How they all sing to the same tune, and what a fool they must take me for!”

She cast her eyes disdainfully towards her mirror, but somehow did not so disdainfully withdraw them, and indeed for a little while did not withdraw them at all. For to her surprise the face she found there, all flushed with fresh air and excitement, was one which unaccountably struck her for the first moment as almost beautiful.

But she had long ago settled in her own mind that she was not and could not be a beauty, and presently turned away with a shake of the head and something that sounded like a sigh.

CHAPTER IV.

Waiting for the End.

A LARGE chamber of handsome dimensions, but made dreary-looking by dingy dark-coloured paper, gaunt dusty hangings, and above all by a spectral four-post bedstead which constituted its principal piece of furniture—doubly dreary-looking just now in the grey light of the bleak March sky that showed dimly through the drawn blinds—such was the room into which Austin Waters on arriving at his uncle's house found himself ushered.

He was in a state of excited bewilderment which made him feel almost as one in a dream, but through the confusion of his senses he perceived on entering two persons in the room both of whom he ought to know. One of these, sitting at the foot of the bed making entries in

a note-book, was a large heavy-looking man of solemn countenance and demeanour, who was familiar to him as Dr. Plummer, the chief physician of the neighbourhood; the other, just then in the act of giving an adjusting touch to the pillows, was a fat red-faced old woman, whom he recognised as Mrs. Muggridge, the last new housekeeper. He was also aware of something that lay beneath the bed-clothes, shaping them into a long narrow heap not unlike a mound in a church-yard, and knew that he stood in the presence of Uncle Gilbert.

He made a few wavering steps towards the bed, and presently found somebody shaking his hand. It was Dr. Plummer, who had politely risen to receive him.

"A most melancholy occasion, Mr. Austin," said the doctor in a low oily whisper. "Ah! I am afraid it must be very near the last."

Austin Waters looked at the motionless heap before him—motionless save for an occasional slight twitching movement—but could make no response.

"Ah! very sad," commented the doctor.

"Poor dear!" sighed Mrs. Muggridge, not be-

cause she was particularly fond of a master in whose service she was comparatively a stranger, but because she felt that something was demanded of her by the proprieties of the occasion.

Austin began to feel that something was demanded of him too, and, making a great effort, stammered out :

“Is—is there no hope?”

His voice sounded so strange to him that he could hardly recognise it as his own. But apparently there were other ears that did recognise it, for no sooner had he spoken than something stirred among the bed-clothes, and another voice (so thick and husky it was!) said :

“Austin !”

He had so little expected to be thus accosted that he shook from head to foot, and could hardly control himself sufficiently to answer :

“Yes, Uncle Gilbert.”

“Come here,” said the thick husky voice, and a face was raised from the pillow—a yellow, furrowed, distorted face ghastly to see, and more ghastly still because to the distortion of paralysis there now seemed to be added the distortion of an attempted smile. For a minute

Austin found a pair of bleared half-glazed eyes staring at him, then heard the same voice say, issuing laboriously from dry slow-moving lips :
“Long-looked-for comes at last, you see.”

Austin could not at once reply, and the dry lips had time to articulate :

“What’s the matter? Are you ill too?”

He felt that it was necessary to answer, and compelled himself to falter forth humbly :

“I am so sorry, uncle, so anxious——”

He was interrupted by a gasping guttural sound which he presently saw was intended for a chuckle.

“Anxious about the will, eh? Oh! I’ve not forgotten it.”

The words were accompanied with what seemed to Austin so demoniacal a grin that he remained silent perforce.

“It is there—the cabinet in the corner—” went on the old man, speaking with increased difficulty, and pointing with a lean, shrivelled hand in which a little life was still left. “Top drawer—key under pillow—just here—Aha! wouldn’t you like to look—wouldn’t you like to know——”

He broke off with the same dismal chuckle as before, apparently too much exhausted to say more.

A damp dew had gathered on Austin's forehead, and his eyes wandered nervously round the room, first resting vacantly on the cabinet in the corner, then straying back to the sick man's pillow. Presently, finding his uncle's face still turned towards him, he started, and murmured feebly :

"How can you think I care—at such a time as this——"

But even as he spoke he saw the withered eyelids slowly droop until at last they altogether closed. The sudden flicker had subsided, and the old man relapsed into his former state, giving no sign of life save an occasional tremor of the limbs and now and then a faint catching of the breath. Dr. Plummer came forward with soft solemn step, and, putting out his plump white hand towards the thin yellow one that lay extended on the bed-clothes, pressed his fingers on the wrinkled wrist.

"A comatose condition which can only terminate in dissolution," he whispered authorita-

tively. "The end may be expected from one minute to another."

Having delivered this dictum, the doctor stole noiselessly back to his seat, and equally noiselessly Mrs. Muggridge subsided into the comfortable chair she had provided for herself behind the curtain at the further side of the bed. For two or three minutes more Austin stood gazing dreamily around—at the closed eyes that had so lately looked on him, at the cabinet in the corner, at the white pillow that swelled upwards round the dying man's head. At last, seeing the doctor once more apply himself to his note-book, he was reminded that he might be kept standing there for some time, and, with another mechanical look round, he too sat down to wait.

To wait! What for? Stunned and mazed as were his senses, he could not help asking himself this question as the idea of waiting occurred to him; and he could not help answering it with a horrible particularity of detail that made him tremble. He was waiting for the cessation of those occasional slight tremors of the limbs and those faint catchings of the

breath, for the final subsidence of the slow pulse beating under that wrinkled wrist which he could still see from his place by the bedside (the face was hidden by the half-drawn curtain), for the transmutation into lifeless clay of yonder human heap that lay beneath the bed-clothes—sluggish and inert, and yet, while it retained the name of man, an insuperable barrier between him and the top drawer of the cabinet in the corner.

He shut his eyes in horror at his own thoughts. What! to be impatient of the poor remnant of life even now ebbing out of those frozen veins, to feel angry with the poor departing spirit for its lingering—angry now—now that it really was departing! He tried to think of other things, and, when he found he could not, tried not to think at all, tried to count the tickings of the clock on the chimney-piece.

One, two, three, four—How slow those tickings came, as though the clock itself were tired—worn out with waiting! Tick, tick, tick, tick—wait, wait, wait, wait. Ah! what a frightful thing it was to wait—worse even than

to die! The dying knew nothing, felt nothing; were in a state of suspended consciousness both as regards this world and the next, whereas the waiting——Strange to think of, that those who were thus in themselves nonentities, dead to this state of existence and not yet awakened to another, should nevertheless have this grim power of arresting the action of the living, of holding all the business of life in abeyance, of keeping keys under their pillows——

He shuddered. The demon of impatience had come upon him again, and again he must strive to cast it forth. Tick, tick, tick, tick——but that monotonous sound only made him more impatient still. He tried harder than ever to think of something else, but the thoughts that presented themselves had a hideous fantastic incongruity about them that made him shudder anew. It came into his head, for instance, how he had once read of some great man's mother who, being occupied as Uncle Gilbert was occupied now, had sent down word to a friend who called to see her that she was particularly engaged in dying. Engaged

in dying—what an idea—as though it were some business which required time and attention to execute. Well, and so it did require time—he might see that for himself—a long time. And then he fell to wondering if the old lady who had spoken of death so lightly had kept anybody waiting as he was being kept waiting now, if in her room there had been a cabinet, if under her pillow there had been a key, if——

Impatient again! How horrible it was—so horrible that, finding he absolutely could not keep impatience off, he began trying to think if he had any excuse for feeling it. Ah! surely if any one in this world had any excuse for impatience under such circumstances, that one was himself. How long and wearily he had waited, what years and years of slow crushing anguish he had suffered—and all by means of the old man whose last dregs of life were even now oozing out so tardily. Ah! how he had suffered! what torture that old man had put him to—that dreaded, hated, abhorred old man! A vision of the past rose before him—his happy Liverpool home, his three pretty little children,

his wife's smiling face ; and then other memories came crowding after these—the squalid gentility of his life under Uncle Gilbert's eyes, the tedium of enforced idleness, his wife's tears and pallid cheeks, his own patient endurance of taunts and insults that at one time it would have set his blood boiling to think of, three tiny coffins borne one after the other across the threshold of that ill-omened rent-free house—ay, and other memories still, which as they presented themselves made him almost groan aloud in agony.

Oh ! the wreck, the waste that his life had been—would be at least if there should be disappointment now. Disappointment ! He felt his tongue grow dry within his mouth as he thought of it, as he asked himself in despair how he should bear it. But he could not bear it, he would not. If disappointment came, he would simply walk to the nearest pool deep enough for a man to lie down in—His poor wife and daughter would miss him for a time, but he could not help that—not even for their sakes could he endure his life longer if disappointment was in store.

Yes, but then disappointment was not in store—he was sure of it, he knew it, and why should he harass himself? In the top drawer of yonder cabinet lay that which was to repair the ruin of his life, which was to make up to him all, and more than all, that he had suffered. Oh! if only he could get one look, if only the time would come when he might put his hand under that pillow—— But as he reached this point he found his heart beating so fast and his whole blood in such a fever of excitement that he was obliged to break off in sheer apprehension lest he should somehow commit himself in the presence of the doctor and the housekeeper. He must be patient—he must wait a little longer.

Tick, tick, tick, tick. He would not think more, but sat listening to the clock, to the occasional rustle of the housekeeper's dress as she made an involuntary change of position, to the faint scratching of the doctor's pencil as it travelled over the lines of the note-book—a dreary concert of slight sounds only varied from time to time by a yet sligher sound that now and then would come from the bed. As he listened

to it all, he thought the monotony would turn his brain. But how could he escape ?

At last the scratching of the pencil ceased. The doctor, having apparently written all that he had to write, put the note-book back into his pocket. Then he raised his eyes and took a long look in the direction of the patient still lying between life and death, then he twiddled with his gold chain, then he took out his pocket-handkerchief and blew his nose in dumb show, and lastly he drew forth his watch. Was it possible that he was beginning to get impatient too ?

Just as Austin was thinking thus, his eyes and the doctor's met. The latter immediately rose, and, coming towards him on tip-toe, whispered :

"It may be some time still before a change supervenes. What do you say to going downstairs for a little ?—Mrs. Muggridge will call us if anything happens. Or would you prefer——"

"Thank you, I would much rather wait in the parlour," said Austin hastily.

Wait ! What an awkwardly chosen expression ! But it had slipped from him unawares.

The doctor staid a moment to whisper a few words of routine instruction to Mrs. Mugridge, then rejoined Austin, and they left the room together. Ah! what an emancipation it was to breathe the fresh air of the staircase, to be out of earshot of that horrible clock!

They went downstairs to the parlour—a large and lofty, though, by reason of the meagreness of its furniture, a somewhat bare and cold-looking room. But no sooner had Austin entered it than he felt that the task of waiting here would be no less oppressive than the task of waiting upstairs had been. The restraint of a stranger's presence was intolerable—perhaps more intolerable now that he was at liberty to speak and move at discretion than in the chamber of death itself. He felt so utterly helpless as to what he ought to say or do.

“A wonderful constitution,” remarked the doctor, gently letting himself drop into an arm-chair. “Really I don't know when I have met with another such in the whole course of my professional experience.”

“Oh! very,” said Austin, looking abstractedly out of the window, whither he had loitered

because he felt that by standing he would better preserve his freedom of action than by sitting down. But he had hardly begun to look when he bethought himself what passers-by might say if they saw him standing at the window on such a day as this, and he came away to plant himself before an old-fashioned engraving of the "Death of Charles the Fifth."

"Let me see, eighty-six last birth-day, I think," went on the doctor pensively. "Ah! a very advanced age, to be sure!"

"Yes," said Austin, wincing.

As if he did not know that already! What did the man mean by bothering him? And then he fell to wondering if there was anybody waiting downstairs when Charles the Fifth lay dying, and, if so, how they managed to pass the time.

There was another pause, again broken by the doctor, who, sitting opposite the window, commanded a view of the garden and path leading up to the house.

"Dear me, here is Mr. Podmore. Coming to inquire, I suppose."

A subdued ring made itself heard, and Austin,

to whom any distraction was welcome, looked eagerly towards the door. There was a low-voiced parley in the hall, and immediately afterwards Mr. Podmore was shown in.

Mr. Podmore was a person of some importance in Chorcombe, being neither more nor less than the principal lawyer of the place. He was a short stoutish man with a large nose, upright-standing hair, a well developed bump of self-esteem, and an impressively dignified countenance made more dignified still by a white neck-cloth, spotless as his own reputation, which he wore on all occasions. But, awe-inspiring as Mr. Podmore looked, his character was not altogether without the softer social attributes. He was always of course dignified, as befitted one high in the confidence of all the best families of the neighbourhood, but in the company of those whom he considered to be of his own set he could come out as a good fellow and bon-vivant, and even, with reverence be it spoken, as something of a gossip.

He shook hands cordially with his friend the doctor—cordially, yet with a certain decorous hush about his manner which was his mode of

paying tribute to the grim visitor whose shadow even then rested on the house.

"Ah! Plummer, how do you do? I just stopped at the door to inquire, and when I heard you were here I thought I would look in on you for a minute. And so things are quite at the last, they tell me?"

"Quite," said the doctor. "It may take place now at any moment."

Here Austin Waters, still standing before the picture, made a slight movement which drew towards him the attention of the new-comer, who advanced to greet him very politely—more politely perhaps than he had ever done before.

"Ah! Mr. Austin, I beg your pardon. You are pretty well, I hope?"

"Pretty well," said Austin hoarsely.

"Oh yes! to be sure—very trying occasion of course. Well, well, it is a debt we must all pay."

Austin did not answer; he was thinking of the top drawer of the cabinet, and for the instant could think of nothing else.

"And then he is an old man and has had a long life, you must remember," went on

the lawyer in his most consoling tones.

"Oh yes! certainly," assented Austin.

"Enjoying all his faculties too up to the very last. And what a thing that is to be thankful for, especially where there is property to be disposed of."

The blood rushed to Austin's face; it had just occurred to him that perhaps Mr. Podmore, who had been for many years occasionally employed as his uncle's lawyer, might already possess the knowledge he so thirsted for.

"But I suppose all that has been settled years ago," continued Mr. Podmore, looking at him a little inquisitively. "He was too good a man of business to leave such a thing to the last."

"Do—do you not know then?" stammered Austin.

Mr. Podmore shook his head.

"I? Oh no! it was a subject he never so much as mentioned. It is a fancy with some people to make a mystery about such things, you know."

Austin said nothing, but merely set himself to look at the picture harder than ever—so hard that at last he could almost imagine himself

projected into the death-chamber which it represented. The artist had depicted a piece of furniture opposite the bed that recalled the cabinet upstairs, and it seemed as though he could never have done gazing at it and speculating on what it might contain.

Mr. Podmore glanced at him with some appearance of curiosity, then, seeing that he was not inclined for further conversation, turned once more to his friend the doctor, and the pair sat down.

There was silence between them for a little while—another tribute to the presence of the grim visitor upstairs—but at last one of the two made a low-toned remark to the effect that it was a cold day, and the other said yes it was, and after that they got on swimmingly. One or two whispered questions and answers were first exchanged as to the nature of the case in the room above, then something was said as to the amount of illness in the village generally, then the weather was once more touched upon, and finally the conversation wandered off to such irrelevant topics as the state of the funds and the prospects of the session. But Austin

hardly heard a word, and what he did hear had no meaning for him.

He came away from the picture at last, afraid that the others might guess what it was that interested him in it, and took to walking up and down—as softly as possible, so that the creaking of his footsteps might not drown any other sound. For all this time he was intently listening—listening for some sign from upstairs.

Presently he stopped, listening more intently than ever, and his heart gave a bound.

He thought he had heard something like a door opening upstairs. And after a few seconds more of such listening his heart gave another bound. He distinctly heard a foot on the upper landing.

The foot began to descend the stairs; he could hear it each time that it was set down—hear it in spite of the chattering of the two men beside him. At last he heard it reach the bottom of the staircase—advance along the hall—pause outside the parlour-door—ah! how his heart beat! And yet even then the two men took no notice.

The door opened, and Mrs. Muggridge ap-

peared, her red face not quite so red as usual.

"Oh! sir, if you please——" she began, looking at the doctor, then paused and dropped a curtsey.

The doctor looked round, fairly roused at last.

"Well?" he asked with grave attention.


"If you please, sir, I thought just now as how master seemed to be lying very quiet like, and I went up to look at him close, and if you please, sir——"

She dropped another curtsey, and everybody in the room knew what had happened. Everybody—even Austin, though from his dull fixed gaze and statue-like immobility he might have been deemed incapable of understanding anything.

There was a minute's silence during which the falling of a pin might have been heard, and then the doctor said :

"I am going upstairs. Would you like to come too?"

He moved forward, and Mr. Podmore followed, the latter however making way as he drew near the door for Austin to precede him.



Austin saw that he was expected to accompany them, and went. But his whole faculties were for the time benumbed—so benumbed that he had ceased to think even of the cabinet-drawer.

They entered the grey sombre room upstairs, more grey and sombre than ever now, for the day was beginning to wane; and stood by the side of that spectral four-post bed, looking at what lay there.

“Yes, it is quite over,” whispered the doctor, bending forward to touch the wrinkled hand that Austin had sat watching a while ago.

“It seems to have been very peaceful,” murmured the lawyer.

“As quiet as a lamb,” softly put in Mrs. Muggridge.

Austin did not speak—only stood with his eyes riveted on the withered pinched dead face that lay upon the pillow, as intently as though his gaze sought to penetrate beyond the face and the pillow too. And indeed as he looked he did begin to think of something on the other side of that face and the other side of that pillow. He began to think of the key of the cabinet-drawer.

He began to think of it, and when he had once begun he could not keep himself from going on, until presently he was able to think of nothing else, until he had almost forgotten the dead face which lay before him on the pillow, and only remembered what was underneath. Ah! that key, that key—if he might only feel his fingers close on it, if he might only fit it into the lock of yonder drawer! If only he might! But how was he to get it from that dead guardianship with others looking on? He knew that they had no right to say him nay, but for all that he dared not let them see what things were in his mind. He must be patient yet a little while—patient though those throbbing pulses of his should burst with longing. And so, tutoring himself to patience, he stood, looking at the dead face, but thinking of the key of the cabinet-drawer. Oh! when, when?

The others stood and looked too, keeping a solemn silence which pressed on Austin's heart like a weight of lead. At last the voice of the doctor was heard saying in subdued tones :

"Well, you will see that everything is properly arranged, Mrs. Muggridge."

"Yes, sir. And if you would have no objection, sir, to let me call in Mrs. Thompson to help—a nice respectable woman with four children as clean and civil-spoken——"

"I dare say it would be a very good plan," said the doctor. "But anything of that kind you had better mention to Mr. Austin; he is the person you have to look to now, you know."

Austin heard, and a sudden flush rose to his cheeks. He thought he saw how he might get at the key without further delay.

"I can say nothing about that," he answered, raising his eyes. "And of course nobody can say anything until we have seen what is in the—the——"

He paused and glanced at the lawyer, who supplied the word immediately.

"The will? Ah! to be sure. Yes, we must be beginning to think about the will soon."

"It is in that cabinet—the top drawer," said Austin quickly. "And the key is under the pillow; he told me himself. Shall—shall——"

He looked at the lawyer imploringly.

"I think we may as well," said Mr. Podmore, answering the look. "It is desirable to know as soon as possible if any instructions are left for our immediate guidance."

Austin put his hand towards the bed-head, and, turning once more to Mr. Podmore to make sure that he had really obtained sanction for what he was about to do, slid it gently under the pillow. For an instant he shuddered as he felt on his hand the weight of the dead man's head, but in the next his fingers had come in contact with a bunch of keys, and he shuddered no more.

He drew the keys forth, and, almost blinded though he was with agitation, immediately singled out one he knew to be that which he wanted, then, nearly tottering as he went, crossed the room to the cabinet. Somehow he managed to put the key into the lock of the top drawer, and in another second the drawer was open.

A single packet lay there—a packet on the covering of which were inscribed in the old man's largest and clearest hand the words, "Last

Will and Testament of Gilbert Waters." The expectant heir clutched at the document, then, with another look towards the lawyer, laid his fingers on the seal.

"Ahem!" said Mr. Podmore, with a glance at the bed. "Had we not better go down stairs?"

Austin dared not disobey the suggestion, and moved towards the door without a word. Presently, having, he knew not how, made his way downstairs, he found himself again in the parlour, with the lawyer and doctor beside him, and in his hand the packet out of the cabinet drawer. He laid his fingers once more on the seal, and this time Mr. Podmore gave him a sign of encouragement.

But his fingers trembled so that he could do nothing. The lawyer came to his assistance.

"Shall I open it, Mr. Austin? Such things are more in my way than yours, perhaps."

Austin nodded. Mr. Podmore took the packet from his unresisting hands, broke the seal, and drew from the envelope a paper which he straightway began to unfold.

What a rustling that paper made ! and what a time the man was in opening it, and smoothing it out, and getting it under his eyeglass ! Would he never have done ?

At last all preliminaries were completed ; the will—Uncle Gilbert's will—was spread open on the table, and Mr. Podmore had got his eyeglass fairly to bear on it.

“Ha—hum—let me see—yes, all in proper form—duly signed and attested—ah ! done at Bristol—twenty-one years ago. Ah—hum—hum—I, Gilbert Waters—sound mind—and so on—hum—hum—ah ! here we are—give and bequeath—hum—hum—My dear Mr. Waters” (here the lawyer looked up with something of surprise in his manner), “allow me to offer you my very best congratulations. You are your uncle's sole heir and legatee.”

Austin's pale lips moved slightly, but no sound came from them.

“Yes, there is no mistake about it—all estate and effects, real and personal, whatsoever and wheresoever, and so on—nephew Austin Waters and heirs for ever—all as clear as crystal. And dear me, Mr. Waters, I must congratulate you

again—here is a memorandum in your uncle's handwriting, dated last week and addressed to you as his heir, by which I see that the property is even larger than——”

But Austin Waters heard no more. With a faint cry he had fallen on the floor at the lawyer's feet.

CHAPTER V.

New-born Honours.

IF a stranger had happened to be passing through Chorcombe next morning, he might have noticed with some curiosity a certain house in a certain street which seemed to be attracting to itself all the attention of idlers and passers-by. Everybody who went by gave it a glance, sometimes even stopping to stare up at the windows; and yet the house was only a plain, rather shabby, one-storied cottage exactly like the others on each side, while the windows, protected by closely drawn blinds, defied the most attentive scrutiny. If the hypothetical stranger, noticing all these things, had been sufficiently inquisitive to ask what was remarkable about this dwelling, apparently only distinguished from its neighbours by greater

silence and more decorous avoidance of publicity, he would have been told that the owner had just succeeded by the death of a relative to a fortune of two hundred thousand pounds.


For so indeed it was. The owner of the house was Austin Waters, and Austin Waters was old Gilbert's sole heir and legatee, with no possible hitch or flaw in his legateship. There was no ambiguity discovered or discoverable in the wording of the will, no disappointed claimant raising doubts as to the testator's sanity, no inconvenient codicil turning up in a hay-loft or bed-tester or secret drawer, or for that matter in existence. Uncle Gilbert had taken pleasure in tormenting his nephew with doubts of his good faith, had so tormented him cruelly and pitilessly, but he had never really meditated such treachery as would have been involved in the violation of his promise. And now the promise was fulfilled, gloriously, superabundantly fulfilled, and Austin's humble dwelling, with its drawn blinds and hushed exterior, was marked out as that of the richest man in Chorcombe.

Inside the house everything was in an unquiet, unsettled state strangely at variance

with the demurely tranquil aspect which it presented to the external world. Nothing was in its right place that morning, nothing was done at its right time. There was a tumult and confusion, a hurrying up and down stairs, a jumble of irrelevant question and answer—a general commotion through the household which looked as though for its members the whole world had been turned upside down. And indeed this was not very far from being the case.

In the little parlour where he had yesterday been discussing the chances of wealth or ruin, Austin Waters sat at his desk, pen in hand. He had soon regained consciousness after his fainting-fit, and, having duly taken a sleeping-draught prescribed for him on the previous evening, had this morning received an early visit from Dr. Plummer (the first that the doctor had paid that day), and was pronounced to be surmounting the immediate shock of his bereavement very satisfactorily. But, Dr. Plummer's sleeping-draught notwithstanding, he had scarcely closed his eyes all night through.

It has been said that he was at his desk ; but though he had been at his desk all morning, he




had as yet hardly begun the first of the notes of intimation which he had sat down to write. His thoughts were wandering so that in any case he would have found it next to impossible to concentrate them, and, as it happened, he was being perpetually distracted by external interruptions. First it was the doctor, who had so kindly given him precedence of all other patients; then it was the Rev. Mr. Elkins, the parish clergyman, who called with the most friendly condolences and offers of service on behalf of Mrs. Elkins and himself; then it was a succession of polite inquirers at the street-door, varied by the delivery of some half-dozen circulars from different tradesmen in the neighbourhood who in the most obliging way imaginable offered their goods for inspection, especially drawing attention to the quality of their mournings. Nor was this all; there was Mrs. Waters, who, her face unwontedly flushed, but her manner almost as quiet as ever, sat sewing beside her husband in the parlour; and there was Emmy, incessantly tripping in and out of the room about something or other, and apparently under physical incapacity to be still for two

minutes together. Poor Emmy, she tried hard to show, she even tried hard to feel, some touch of seemingly regret for the sad event which had raised the family to sudden greatness, but she did not the least in the world succeed. It was such a delicious new experience this of being rich, and she was so happy in it! As for the feeling which had crossed her for a moment yesterday, that Uncle Gilbert's money might perhaps be a matter of comparative indifference, she was separated from the state of mind which made it possible by what seemed to be a gulf of ages.

"I wonder Madame Lebrun isn't here," said Emmy, as for the fiftieth time at least that morning she came fluttering into the parlour. "I think she ought to have been by this time, don't you, mamma? She might know that people are always in a hurry about mournings."

Madame Lebrun (name supposed originally to have been Brown) was the fashionable dress-maker of Chorcombe, and Emmy had never yet worn a dress made by other hands than her mother's or her own.



"She will come soon, my dear, no doubt. Had you not better sit down and wait patiently? I am afraid we are disturbing your papa sadly."

"Not at all, not at all," said Austin, looking up and pushing away his papers as though glad of the respite. "There is plenty of time before the post goes, and even if there were not— Let me see, what were you saying? Madame Lebrun, the dressmaker—you are sure she is a first-rate one, eh? Mind, you are to have everything first-rate now."

"Oh! but she is quite first-rate, papa, I assure you; indeed I have heard people say she makes as well as the London ones, almost. If you only saw the dress she sent home last week to Miss Egerton—a splendid pink satin at ten shillings a yard, only fancy!"

"Ten shillings a yard, was it? Then look here, child, tell the woman to make you another pink satin exactly like it—at twenty shillings a yard if she likes, there."

"You dear papa! But that wouldn't do with the mourning, you know."

"The mourning, ah yes! I forgot the mourning. But you are to be dressed like ladies,

mind—the best of everything. What are the handsomest stuffs that can be worn in mourning? tell me.”

“Oh! I don’t know, papa, there are so many things. Moire antique and velvet—these would be more suitable for mamma, perhaps—and then there’s silk——”

“Moire antique and velvet. Agnes, remember—never anything commoner.”

Mrs. Waters looked up at her husband with a smile, a smile almost as bright as her smiles used to be of old—such is the healing power of wealth even on those who are least its worshippers. “Never anything commoner! But, my dear, how do you think I am to get comfortably through the work of the day——”

“Work of the day! you are to do no more work. You have always been a lady—the best in the county—and now you are going to live like one. I wish you would put down that sewing—what is the good of it all now?”

“But it is a pleasure to me, Austin—really it is. I should not like to be sitting idle.”

“Oh! well, if you actually prefer to be always slaving——”

"Oh! we shall soon get mamma out of all that," put in Emmy apologetically. "But seriously, it would be a good plan to make up our minds what we want before Madame Lebrun comes. And really I think that for mamma a moire antique and a velvet, and perhaps a silk for morning wear——"

"Very well, and tell the woman to make you two of each kind while she is about it."

"Two of each kind, Austin!" said Mrs. Waters with another bright smile. "I should be puzzled to find house room for them, I am afraid."

"Very likely you would here, but what do you say to Chorcombe Lodge, pray?" (Chorcombe Lodge was the name of Uncle Gilbert's house.) "Room enough to keep a few dresses there, I fancy. And if you think I'm going to stop a day longer than I can help in a beastly hole like this while we have got a splendid house waiting to receive us——Ah! Agnes, my own Agnes, you shall see, you shall see; we have gone through a great deal, but all will be made up now."

Mrs. Waters did not answer (perhaps she remembered better than her husband what it

was that had to be made up), but Emmy laid her white hand on her father's shoulder, and echoed :

“ Oh yes ! papa, all made up now.”

“ Yes, my darling, and made up to you too.” He slid his arm round her waist, and looked fondly up in her radiant face. “ You are an heiress now, Emmy, as good an heiress as any in England, and we shall let them all see that you are, shan't we ? Take you up to London, and show you off in Belgravia, what do you say to that ?”

“ To London ! Oh papa !” exclaimed Emmy, her breath almost taken away by so magnificent a prospect.

“ Yes, and make you the belle of the season, how will you like it ? All the fashionable young gentlemen sighing at your feet, and perhaps a lord or two among them, who knows ?”

“ Oh papa ! what nonsense you do talk !” was Emmy's remonstrance, but she gave a little side-glance at the picture in the dark corner even while she uttered it.

Here there was a tap at the door, which presently opened to disclose the somewhat untidy

head of the charwoman who had been hired to help on this occasion of extra work and confusion.

“Here’s madam if you please, mum.”

“Show her upstairs to my bed-room,” answered Emmy, “we shall be there directly. I must go now, papa dear ; we can’t keep Madame Lebrun waiting. Mamma, will you come too ? Do make haste.”

And with these words she tripped lightly out of the room and upstairs. Ah ! how happy she was—how exquisitely happy ! it was more delightful to be rich even than she had imagined. And only to think of that John Thwaites as good as saying he wished her to be poor all her life ! How cruel, how selfish !

Mrs. Waters put aside her work, and prepared to leave the room, rather slowly and lingeringly however, and looking all the time intently at her husband, who had once more drawn his papers towards him. Before she had reached the door she paused, and, coming back close to where he sat, said softly :

“Austin, now you will be able to pay——”

She sank her voice so low that the next

word was inaudible, and yet, inaudible though it was, she accompanied it with a half-frightened glance round the room as if to make sure that she was not overheard.

He evidently knew what she meant, and answered promptly :

“Pay him—I should think I will—pay him twice over—yes, and ten thousand pounds besides by way of interest.”

She shook her head gently.

“I am sure he will take nothing more than what he has lent, but I should like him to have that. You will send it soon, won’t you?”

“Of course I will—am I not just as anxious about it as you are? But it is no good sending it until we know whether there is any chance of his coming over as he talked of in his last letter.”

“I wish you would see about it, dear Austin. There must surely be another letter waiting for us by this time, and I am so longing to know—it would be such a pleasure——”

“Oh, yes! and so it would be a pleasure to me, of course. I’ll tell you what, I’ll take the train over to Bristol one day this week; I need

not grudge the fare now, or a cab to the post-office either. I am sure you must know that I am quite as much interested in it as you can be."

"Thank you, dear." She might have said more, but just then a double knock sounded at the street-door, and she hurried to make her escape upstairs before the visitor, whoever he was, should have been admitted.

She had not been a moment gone when, with a profusion of polite bows, there entered a smug well-fed personage—at present somewhat solemnly got up in an irreproachable suit of black, and with all the smirks carefully smoothed out of a face naturally rather jovial than otherwise. This was Mr. Jupp, by calling house-agent and auctioneer, but also willing to be employed as undertaker in the case of any genteel funeral that might take place in the neighbourhood.

It was in his capacity of undertaker that he had called this morning, and he had done his best to assume his most decorous undertaker's manner.

"I hope I see you well, sir," he began in

carefully modulated tones while he softly glided into the room—"as well at least as circumstances permit. Ah! most melancholy—very much so indeed."

"Oh! certainly," assented the mourner, a little awkwardly perhaps, for he was rather taken aback by this way of looking at things.

"I have to apologise for intruding at such a time, but business, you know—I understand from Dr. Plummer that you think of employing me on the present occasion, sir?"

"Yes, he was mentioning your name this morning, and——"

"Ah yes! he is always kind enough to commend me at these times. A most superior person is Dr. Plummer, and I am quite aware how much I have to thank him for. So I have taken the liberty of just calling to ask on what principles you would wish the ceremony conducted, sir. I presume on the largest scale——"

"Oh! on the largest scale by all means."

"Just so, sir, with all appropriate adjuncts. Oh! I was quite sure it would be your wish to show every respect possible. Well, he occupied a great position in the county, sir."

"Very," said Austin rather dreamily.

"And his successor occupies a great position after him, sir. Ah! Mr. Waters, I don't know whether you will regard it as a liberty, but if you would allow me to offer my humble congratulations—Such a pleasure as the news has been to me, sir—to me and everybody else in the place, I may say." Here Mr. Jupp relapsed so far into his ordinary house-agent's manner as actually to begin rubbing his hands, but, quickly recollecting the nature of his present business, he checked himself, and added solemnly: "And what day, sir, would you wish to fix for the obsequies?"

"I—I should like it to be as soon as possible," said Austin, looking at the undertaker rather wistfully.

"Shall we say this day week, Mr. Waters? We can hardly make it earlier for an affair of any importance."

Austin's countenance fell.

"Oh! very well, this day week if you wish it. I only thought that the sooner it was got over—that is—but of course I wish to pay all the respect in my power. And—and

how soon afterwards do you think it would be considered usual for us to move into the house—after the—the funeral, I mean? This is such a very inconvenient little place, you see——”

“Oh! certainly you must get out of it as soon as possible. But as for moving directly to Chorcombe Lodge, I can hardly say if——The lawyers always make so many delays about proving the will and that kind of thing, don’t they? And then you wouldn’t wish to go in until it has been properly done up and decorated, of course.”

“What! do you mean to tell me I have got to stop in this hole till——”

“Stop here! Oh! dear no, not a day longer than you like. For that matter I myself could name two or three highly eligible temporary residences in the neighbourhood that would suit you to a hair—replete with every convenience for a nobleman’s or gentleman’s establishment. And you know it is absolutely necessary that something very considerable should be done to Chorcombe Lodge before it is fit to be occupied by a family of position. Why, it is almost twice

too small, to begin with. Look at Egerton House, for instance."

"True, true," cried Austin eagerly, "I had never thought of that. Of course it must be altered—a paltry old-fashioned place——But I am afraid it will be very difficult."

"Oh no! it won't—not a bit. A handsome wing run up at each side, and a touch or two put to the centre building just to give it a character—something in the way of a cupola or battlemented tower perhaps—and say a Grecian portico thrown out in front—oh! the effect would be something remarkable."

The picture thus conjured up was so pleasing to Mr. Jupp's mind's eye that the undertaker became finally forgotten in the artist, and he positively smacked his lips with hypothetical admiration.

"A capital idea!" said Austin, looking much impressed. "Really I wonder how you came to think of it."

"Ah! but you see I'm in the way of hearing of such things," replied Mr. Jupp modestly. "Why, I happen to know of a case where just such an alteration was made (a nobleman's

house that was too small for him), and strange enough the architect was my own cousin. Tovey of Bristol, architect and land-surveyor—I don't know whether you may have heard the name, but it will be a celebrated one some day, and I'm not afraid of saying so. And that reminds me, if you really thought of any little improvement of the sort, he would be just the man for it."

"I'm sure you are very kind," said Austin gratefully. "And upon my word—Dear me, how that knocker has been going all day!"

Another knock had just sounded at the street-door, causing both Mr. Jupp and his patron to look up with an air of some annoyance. In a minute more the summons was answered, and Mr. Podmore the lawyer was announced.

"My dear sir, how do you do?" said that gentleman, advancing with unwonted geniality of manner. "I have an appointment in the neighbourhood at two—oh! just five minutes to spare, I see—and I could not bring myself to pass without looking in to inquire—Ah! Mr. Jupp."

He nodded stiffly towards Mr. Jupp, who,

understanding that he was in the way and having no further pretext for remaining, muttered something about a particular engagement, and bowed himself out. Meantime the lawyer went on :

“ And Mrs. and Miss Waters—they are pretty well, I hope ?”

It was the first time that he had ever taken cognizance of the existence of Mrs. and Miss Waters, and Austin could not repress a feeling of surprise as he answered in the affirmative.

“ I am happy to hear it,” said Mr. Podmore warmly. “ And now, as I perceive you have some writing to do——”

“ Oh ! but I am delighted to see you,” interrupted Austin hastily. “ Indeed I particularly wished an opportunity of asking—I dare say you may think it rather a strange question, Mr. Podmore, but you see there are matters of business that must be thought of at the most—most trying times even. And I just wanted to ask if you thought it would take very long to—to prove the will, and—and get things into order, you understand.”

Mr. Podmore reflected.

“That depends very much on the firm to whose hands the business is entrusted, Mr. Waters. And as of course I am not aware who may be the legal adviser——”

“Oh! Mr. Podmore, it will be you, won’t it? I’m sure I never thought of anybody else for a single instant, and if only you wouldn’t object——”

Mr. Podmore seemed quite taken by surprise by the suggestion, but after gravely considering a few seconds, during which Austin kept his eyes entreatingly fixed on him, answered with much affability:

“Mr. Waters, I accept the charge. I shall have pleasure in endeavouring to promote your interests in every way in my power.”

“I am so much obliged to you,” said Austin numbly. “And if you could manage that there should be as little delay as possible——”

“I will take care of that, Mr. Waters. And of course I need not remark that any little advance which may be convenient for your immediate purposes I shall be most happy to make.”

“You are very, very kind, I’m sure. You

won't consider it odd, I hope, but one is naturally anxious to get settled, and then I have been thinking of some alterations in the house which I should like to set about pretty soon."

"Ah! some alterations in the house?" said Mr. Podmore, looking up from his watch, which he had just drawn out. "Dear me, I must be going! Chorcombe Lodge, you mean?"

"Yes, perhaps a wing to be run up at each side, and a cupola or turret or something like that on the top—to give it a character, you know. A good plan, don't you think?"

Mr. Podmore reflected again; he never gave an opinion off-hand.

"Well, I dare say something of the kind would be desirable—highly desirable indeed now that I think of it. If you will excuse me, my dear sir, I must positively be off now. We will talk of this some other time, and perhaps I may be even able to recommend—but that will do afterwards."

"There is a Mr. Tovey of Bristol who has been named to me as a first-rate architect," said Austin, thinking it as well that Mr. Podmore

should know exactly how matters stood. "It seems he is Mr. Jupp's cousin, and Mr. Jupp says——"

The lawyer slightly frowned.

"Mr. Jupp! Oh! never mind Mr. Jupp. I think I can find somebody to manage it a great deal better than Mr. Jupp or Mr. Tovey either. But if you will allow me, now I must really—— Dear me, five minutes past two. Good day—I shall have the pleasure again before long——good day."

With these words Mr. Podmore, who prided himself on business-like punctuality, bustled out, and Austin was once more alone. But he had scarcely been left a minute to himself when Emmy made a violent eruption into the room.

"Oh! papa, I thought they were never going, and I have such a lot to tell you. She is to make me two dresses, just to begin with, that is; a silk and a grenadine—the grenadine for evening wear, with the loveliest bugle trimming——She made one exactly like it only last week for Lady Mary Somebody—I forget her name, but some earl's daughter or other, so you may fancy. And oh! papa, she says this Lady Mary and I are

so much alike—we might almost do for sisters. Didn't she say so, mamma" (here she turned to appeal to her mother, who had just then entered)? "only that if anything I have rather the best figure."

"My dear Emmy, I am afraid your papa will think your new dresses are making you quite conceited."

"Well, and if she is, she has as much to be conceited about as any Lady Mary of them all," said her father, looking at her proudly.

Emmy blushed, and seemed about to utter a disclaimer, when a new summons from the knocker came to interrupt the conversation.

"It seems nobody can let us alone to-day," said Austin grumblingly, but yet looking not ill-pleased. "Who is it now, I wonder?"

"I—I fancy it is Mr. Thwaites's knock," murmured Emmy, and then, biting her lip for having committed herself so far, she added quickly: "Shall you and I go upstairs, mamma?"

"I think it would look unkind not to stop and see a friend like Mr. Thwaites, my dear."

Emmy said nothing, and as it was not her way to give up a point in silence, it is probable

that her mother's decision coincided with her own wishes.

There was a minute's pause, during which Emmy felt very hot and uncomfortable, and then, as she had expected, Mr. Thwaites was announced. She had expected him, and yet as he entered she fell suddenly into a great flutter, and when it came to her turn to shake hands the circumstances of their yesterday's parting recurred to her mind with such vividness that she could scarcely see or hear for confusion. She was so much confused that she actually fancied he might be going to squeeze her hand again.

But he did not give it even the faintest pressure, and, regaining composure a little, she remembered what had happened since yesterday, and understood how absurd that fancy of hers had been.

"I hope you will excuse the liberty," she heard him say presently—but he was speaking to her parents, not to her. "I thought I would just come and see how you all are, and——"

"It was very kind of you indeed," said Mrs. Waters cordially. "Pray take a chair."

He sat down, and everybody else followed his

example. As Emmy did so she took the opportunity of throwing a little glance across the room (he had stationed himself as far from her as possible), just for curiosity. She was half angry to see how gloomy and morose he was looking—almost as if he were sulking at the good fortune of the family.

“And then I wanted to—to congratulate you on—on what has happened—that is, of course—you understand what I mean. And I do congratulate you very, very much, Mr. Austin, you and every one.”

Then he was not sulky after all—only in low spirits, and that of course was a matter wholly beyond his own control. Emmy’s little flicker of anger died out at once.

“We are much obliged to you, Mr. Thwaites,” she heard her father say. “I accept your congratulations with a great deal of pleasure.”

“It makes one happier to feel one has such sincere warm-hearted friends as you in the world,” said Mrs. Waters earnestly.

What a kind darling her mother was, to be sure! Her father’s manner was more dignified of course, but then her mother’s was so sweet

and winning—one could hardly wish it different.

“I am afraid I am disturbing you,” said the visitor, looking at the table covered with papers. “You are busy, I see.”

“Oh! there is no such hurry,” answered Austin graciously. “A little extra to do and to think of certainly, but that is what we must expect for some time to come. We shall be moving soon, you know.”

“Yes?” said the young man timidly. “To—to Chorcombe Lodge, I suppose?”

“To Chorcombe Lodge when it has been made fit for a gentleman to live in,” responded Austin, with a somewhat haughty wave of the hand. “I am going to build.”

Emmy looked up, so much interested in the information that for a moment she almost forgot the presence of John Thwaites.

“Build, papa!” she exclaimed.

“Certainly, my dear,” he made answer a little grandiloquently. “A handsome wing on each side, with perhaps a battlemented tower and cupola in the middle, and a Grecian portico thrown out in front—Impossible to live in

the place till something of the kind has been done, at all events."


Emmy was mute with astonishment and delight—delight to hear of such magnificence being in store for her, delight that John Thwaites should be there to hear of it too. And yet she knew all the time that what so gratified her would to him be more or less painful.

"I—I dare say it will be a great improvement," stammered poor John.

"You must come and see us when it is finished and tell us what you think of it," said Austin affably.

"I hope Mr. Thwaites needs no invitation to come and see such old friends as we are, wherever we may be," quickly added Mrs. Waters.

How beautifully considerate her mother was of everybody's feelings! thought Emmy—everybody's, though indeed John Thwaites had always been a favourite. Well, it was odd perhaps what any one could see in John Thwaites, but certainly her mother was an angel. And Emmy glanced up with a little look of filial admiration.



But as she raised her eyes she met those of John Thwaites, and had to lower them again instantly. Even then she was slightly troubled by the recollection of his look—such a sad strange look it had been—a look seeming as it were to come to her from afar, across a great chasm. She could not help being rather sorry, and yet, sorry as she might be, her feelings were not without a little flavour of gratification. There is something pleasant in the consciousness of being sighed after as a bright particular star too far off for mortal attainment—pleasant even though one may be oneself a little in the sighing mood too.

He sat a short time longer, listening to her father's plans for the new house, and though Emmy never again ventured to raise her eyes she did not lose that impression which his look had given her, of a great chasm being between them—a chasm which seemed to be ever widening.

At last he rose; a form of leave-taking was got through, in what fashion Emmy hardly knew; and he was gone. For a little while she felt rather dull and listless, but she had too

many things to think of to be out of spirits long, and quickly recovered herself.

John Thwaites's congratulations were not the last received that day. An hour or two later a note was delivered, addressed to Emmy, and couched as follows :—

*Egerton Park,
Tuesday.*

MY DEAR EMMY,

I know how much you must all be occupied to-day, and therefore have not troubled you with a call, else you may be sure that the news I heard this morning would have brought me to you with all speed. Most heartily, my dear girl, do I congratulate you and all of you on your good fortune, and most heartily do I wish that with it (perhaps I ought rather to say in spite of it, but you would not agree with me there) may be bestowed every blessing that can make life happy. When I hear that you are a little at leisure I will come and see you, and offer my congratulations in person, as I am longing to do ; meanwhile, with best regards to your father and mother, believe me ever,

My dear Emmy,
Your affectionate friend,
OLIVIA EGERTON.

“A very kind letter,” commented Emmy, as she finished reading it to her father and mother. “But how funny to see her always pretending

to despise money! The idea of wishing that one may be happy in spite of one's good fortune!"

"I should have thought she would have been above a piece of conventional cant like that," disdainfully said Austin Waters.

CHAPTER VI.

Mr. Tovey.

A WEEK and a day had passed, and the young spring sun was shining brightly into Austin Waters's house, the blinds of which, no longer pulled down in decorous symbolism of the mourning within, were drawn up to the top as though to admit a double share of light and cheerfulness.


The funeral had taken place the day before, and a very magnificent and impressive funeral it had been. All the shops of the place had been shut during the ceremony (not that the deceased had ever been a specially good customer to any of them, but as a mark of respect, people said), the church was draped in black cloth at fifteen shillings the yard, and all the charity school children were turned out in mourning. Mr. Jupp,

happening for a few minutes to be alone with Austin in the dreary parlour at Chorcombe Lodge after the other mourners had departed, declared almost with tears in his eyes that never in the whole course of his experience had he known an affair of the kind to go off so well.

Nor was this all that Mr. Jupp took an opportunity of saying. By some means or other the conversation turned on the alterations required to make the house habitable, and Austin having made a casual inquiry as to what length of time they might be expected to occupy, Mr. Jupp answered :

“ Well, really, sir—that depends so very much on the expedition of the parties to whom the arrangements might be entrusted. There’s my cousin Mr. Tovey, for instance—you were thinking of him the other day, I believe—he is particularly noted for his speed in executing contracts of the kind. Would you wish me to drop him a line about it, sir? just by way of consulting him.”

“ You—you are very kind,” said Austin, a little confused. “ I should like it very much indeed, only——The fact is, I was mentioning



the matter to Mr. Podmore the other day, and he seemed to have somebody in his eye who——
Do you know anything about it, then?" he inquired, breaking off, for Mr. Jupp was slowly shaking his head from side to side with a bland smile as though of pity for the infirmities of human nature.

"Mr. Podmore has a relation in the building line, sir," replied Mr. Jupp, still with the same bland smile. "His wife's brother-in-law, to my own certain knowledge. Mind, not that I blame Mr. Podmore for a moment; he thinks he is doing the best for you, no doubt. But we are all aware that there is such a thing as being blinded by prejudice."

"I see," said Austin. "Then you wouldn't advise——"

Mr. Jupp shook his head again, more vigorously this time.

"There is nobody living more upright than Mr. Podmore, I am confident. But you can't trust people to be impartial when they are pushing their own relations, can you, sir?"

"I am so glad I mentioned the subject to

you, Mr. Jupp. And you are sure you can recommend this Mr. Tovey, then?"

"Perfectly certain of it, sir. I don't believe you would find any one to come near him either for efficiency, economy, or despatch. But of course if you wish to employ Mr. Podmore's friend——"

"But I don't," said Austin emphatically. "I intend to do what is best for my own interests without being dictated to by Mr. Podmore or anybody else. You can tell your cousin that I place the business in his hands, Mr. Jupp."

"Thank you, sir, he will be very much obliged to you, I am sure. You would like to see him in the course of a few days, I suppose?"

"Yes, the sooner the better. I want the thing set about at once."

"Perhaps he might manage to run over to-morrow, sir. My letter would be delivered in Bristol the first thing in the morning, you see, so that, supposing he has no previous engagement, he might be here by twelve or one o'clock if you wished it."

"I should be very glad indeed, Mr. Jupp. Let him come as soon as he possibly can."

And so the matter had been settled.

The next day came—the day on which it was permissible to pull up the blinds again—and as the hour approached at which Mr. Tovey might be expected, Austin and his family were all assembled in the shabby little parlour with which they were still fain to be content, and which looked shabbier than ever now; at least so Emmy thought as she glanced down at the rich black silk in which her little figure was enveloped.

They had not been waiting long when Mr. Tovey was shown in—a spruce little man somewhere about forty-five years old, of trim cleanly cut figure, albeit slightly inclined to expansiveness, clear ruddy complexion, wide-awake-looking blue eyes, and fair flowing whiskers just beginning to be touched with grey. He bowed politely to the master of the house, and with a certain air of gallantry to the ladies, and then, having taken a chair according to invitation and broken the ice by a casual remark on the weather, he opened business thus :

“Ahem. I believe, Mr. Waters, you wished

to see me with reference to some little alterations you were thinking of making in Chorcombe Lodge. Ah! a very fine situation, to be sure; I was studying it on my way from the station, and I never saw finer capabilities in my life."

"I am very glad you think so," said Austin, with much gratification. "And now what exactly would you recommend?"

"That depends principally on the sort of thing you wish done, Mr. Waters. If you and the ladies would be kind enough to favour me with your ideas——"

"I don't understand much about building myself," said Austin modestly. "I was thinking of wings and a cupola, and perhaps a Grecian portico or something of that sort. But I should leave it very much in your hands."

"Ah! I see; given the existing building as a basis, and then do the best we can—just so." Mr. Tovey considered a few seconds, and then, tapping his forehead triumphantly, resumed:

"I know the exact thing that would suit you; I have it in my head like a map. Two wings—two stories high—long in proportion—

with pillars in front forming colonnade; new façade for centre building, with lofty Corinthian pillars supporting sculptured pediment—the very thing.”

“Upon my word, I think you have hit it,” said Austin admiringly.

“What a magnificent design!” commented Emmy. “Is it not, mamma?”

But its magnificence appeared to have fairly overpowered Mrs. Waters, who was silent, as though almost dismayed by so much grandeur of conception. Presently she said timidly:

“The only thing is, it seems to me hardly worth while, with our small family, to go to so much expense——”

“Oh! of course if expense is an object——” said Mr. Tovey.

“Expense is no object,” interrupted Austin with some haughtiness. “Pray go on, Mr. Tovey.”

“I don’t know if I can elucidate my meaning further by words, really. If you would be kind enough to let me have a sheet of paper and a pencil——”

Emmy sprang up to look for what was wanted,

and Mr. Tovey began to take off his gloves by way of preparation.

"Strange news this is from Beacon Bay, sir," he remarked as he unfastened with some difficulty a refractory button.

Beacon Bay—the place may not be marked so in all maps—was the name of an estate on the coast about seven or eight miles from Chorcombe.

"From Beacon Bay!" said Austin. "Dear me, I have not heard yet."

"What! not heard that the property is to be disposed of?" rejoined Mr. Tovey, slowly tugging at the finger-ends of his gloves. "Yes, all in the market—every square foot of it. Ah! what an investment for somebody!"

Here Emmy laid the desiderated paper and pencil on the table, but as Mr. Tovey had still a glove to get off he naturally went on with what he was saying:

"Poor Mr. Newbold, he is very much to be pitied for having to part with it, but when people have no choice—I suppose if he could have kept it he would have been the richest man in England before five years are over."

“What!” exclaimed Austin in surprise.
“Why, you don’t mean to say such land as that——”

“Oh! as for the land, that’s nothing, but have you not heard about this new railway? Beacon Bay is to be brought into direct communication with London by a branch from Chorcombe, and then they talk of a pier and line of steamers to America. Why, the place will be one of the first ports of the kingdom in half-a-dozen years. Look at its natural advantages—look at its formation, look at its position.”

“Very true,” acquiesced Austin with rather a puzzled air.

Mr. Tovey had got off both his gloves now, but he had become too much interested in his subject not to follow it up.

“And then, while it rises into a great harbour at one end, it will rise into a fashionable watering-place at the other. Think of that hill to the west, and fancy it laid out in crescents and terraces, with villas dotted about here and there for effect—it might be made the model town of the British empire.”

And as he thus spoke a certain fire of pro-

phhecy lighted up Mr. Tovey's eyes, and his ruddy face beamed ruddier still with the glow of artistic inspiration.

"Ah! a sublime idea!" he murmured in a lower tone. "And what a fortune to its promoters!"

"It might turn out very well, of course," put in Mrs. Waters with a glance at her husband. "But I am afraid there is a great deal of risk in all such things."

Mr. Tovey looked at the speaker, and his smooth upper lip was contracted by a slight involuntary curl. But he answered with his usual urbanity:

"Nothing in this world is done without risk, madam—or so-called risk at least. Look at all the great fortunes of the age. But it stands to reason that different minds should be differently constituted, and a good thing too, he! he! If everybody was equally enterprising, nobody would have an advantage, you know."

"And is it quite certain this railway is going to be made?" inquired Austin.

"Oh! for that matter you may say it's as good as made already. The Chairman and

principal Directors have set their hearts on it."

"But, my dear," said Mrs. Waters, "you are surely not thinking——"

"Of course not," answered her husband rather tartly. "I wonder what put such a thing into your head. I only asked the question casually, and so Mr. Tovey understood it, I am certain."

"Oh! dear me yes, I understood it perfectly, sir," said Mr. Tovey, putting his gloves together and taking up the pencil, "and I am sure as for ever expecting or thinking of anything else—— I make a point of mentioning the subject whenever I go, because I think it is right that when there is such an opportunity people should know of it, but of course it is nothing to me whether they take it up or not, and I don't expect that they should. Let me see, this is the house as it stands at present"—here he drew a few rapid lines. "Now on this side I propose to throw out a wing—so—and on this other side another wing—so—with a colonnade all the way along—so—and then add another story to the centre—so—to give it a suitable predominance over the wings, you see—and in

front a façade of pillars—there, that's something like what I mean."

"Oh! how grand it will be!" cried Emmy enthusiastically, as Mr. Tovey displayed the paper on which he had thus developed his idea.

"But don't you think," suggested Mrs. Waters, "that if the wings were not quite so long, and of one story each——"

"Of course I could make them any size you like," replied Mr. Tovey with another slight curl of the lip—"only it would completely spoil the whole thing. For look here—and I should like you to look too, Miss Waters, please—we want the wings to remedy the defects of the original, don't we? Very well, the principal defect of the original is, that though the rooms are of a tolerable size, there is no suite fit for a grand entertainment, say a ball or concert, such as a great county family must sometimes give—ah! I am sure the young lady will agree with me there. Then we have nothing for it, you understand, but to make such a suite in one of the wings; therefore one of the wings must be long, therefore it must be correspondingly high,

therefore the other wing must be just like it, therefore the centre must be raised in proportion—all a matter of sheer necessity, you see. I don't know if I have expressed myself clearly."

"Oh! but indeed you have," said Emmy. "I thoroughly understand, don't you, mamma? There is really nothing else to be done."

Mrs. Waters still looked not altogether convinced, and Mr. Tovey with an imperceptible shrug turned to address himself to her husband.

"Might I ask if the plan meets your approval, sir?"

"Oh yes! I think so—yes—indeed, as you say, there is evidently nothing else—And within what time do you think it could be finished?"

"I will make the necessary calculations, and let you know all particulars as soon as possible, sir. Of course I can give no details at present—on this head or any other—but you may depend on my doing my best to unite both expedition and economy."

"Thank you, Mr. Tovey. You see it is very

awkward having no settled home of our own—”

“Oh! very—I quite appreciate that,” said Mr. Tovey sympathisingly, beginning to draw on his gloves. “I suppose you are thinking of a furnished house in the meantime?”

“Yes,” said Austin. “Oh! we intend to clear out of this hole immediately.”

“In the neighbourhood, sir, I suppose you would wish it?”

“Certainly, I shall have business to transact with Mr. Podmore for a long time to come. But have you any object——”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I was just thinking of a house that I fancy I have heard my cousin Mr. Jupp speak of, which would be the very place for you. I’m afraid it’s hardly fair of me, for I happen to know there is a party very hot on it, but it seems so exactly suited——The Laurels—you know the Laurels, surely—at the corner of the old London road. A very complete residence, sir—stables, coach-house, and all that, of course—and elegantly furnished, in all respects adapted to a family of distinction.”

“I’ll speak to Mr. Jupp about it this after-

noon," said Austin, decisively. "We could move into it at once, I suppose?"

"Not just directly, I am afraid, Mr. Waters, but almost. I think Mr. Jupp said something about the tenants leaving in a month."

"A month!" exclaimed Austin in consternation.

"It will be vacant sooner than any other house on Mr. Jupp's list, sir."

"And are we to be kept waiting a month in this hole—I and my wife and daughter—to please Mr. Jupp?" asked Austin angrily.

"But if there is no other suitable house in the whole neighbourhood, sir," deprecatingly said Mr. Tovey. "I am very sorry for the inconvenience, I'm sure, and if I could think of some other way——Stop, I wonder if Mrs. and Miss Waters would object to run down to the sea-side for a few weeks—nothing like sea air for the roses on a lady's cheek, they say, and after the trial they have sustained I should think it was just the thing for them."

"It would be very nice indeed," said Emmy, seeing that she seemed to be more especially appealed to.

"I knew the ladies would like it," rejoined Mr. Tovey triumphantly. "And there you see what an advantage it would be to have a new marine city at Beacon Bay; it would be exactly what you would like just now—a convenient sea-side residence almost within reach of home. But as it is, I suppose you must just try one of the regular watering-places."

"I should not like one of the regular watering-places at all," said Mrs. Waters, looking at her husband. "If we could find some quiet sea-side place where we might all rest for a few weeks, with nobody to speak to——"

"Ah yes! and recruit for the fatiguing social duties that will be in store when you come home," said Mr. Tovey, with a consolatory glance at Emmy, who was looking a little crest-fallen. "Upon my word, it's a good plan to take the opportunity of rest when you can get it, for you would not be able to join in any gaieties just at present, of course, whereas afterwards you will be perfectly overwhelmed. The exigencies of your position, you know. Well, if a quiet place is what you wish, I can lay my finger on the precise locality to suit you—a lit-

the sea-port in Dorsetshire where Mrs. Tovey and the children were last year" (he mentioned the name of a small fishing-village which shall here be called Nidbourne)—"an enchanting spot, with cliffs, and trees, and hill and dale, and purling brooks, and the rest of it, and such sea-breezes, oh! a perfect paradise. And if you don't like the fuss and trouble of regular lodgings, there's my wife's sister, Mrs. Sawyer, who lives there, and would be only too happy to give up half her house to you—a sweet little villa not five minutes from the beach—and would make you as snug as snug. What do you say, ladies, not a bad idea, eh?"

"I think I could be very happy there for a few weeks," said Mrs. Waters rather wistfully. "If only you, Austin dear, are quite sure you would enjoy it——"

"I!" answered her husband. "Oh! but it is impossible I can go anywhere just now. For one thing, I have got so much to arrange with Mr. Podmore, and then I must stop and look after the building and so on. Why, you might know I am over head and ears in business."

"You are going to stay here, Austin! Oh!

then we will stay here too. We never could think of going away to enjoy ourselves and leaving you behind."

"Oh! but Mr. Waters will enjoy himself too, never fear for that," said Mr. Tovey cheerily. "You would find very fair bachelor accommodation, sir, at the Brown Bear," he went on, addressing Austin; "it's where I always put up myself, and upon my word it's very fair indeed. But it would be *infra dig.* for ladies of course—so unless you thought of stopping in this house——"

"Quite out of the question," interrupted Austin.

"But why should it be, dear?" pleaded his wife.

"Because I don't choose to live in such a cursed den when I can get out of it," he retorted sharply.

"You know, mamma dear, we really couldn't," expostulated Emmy.

"Well, positively I confess I do not see how you very well could," said Mr. Tovey. "And in that case, ladies, upon my word I think you'll find my plan the best. And look at the benefit you will derive from the sea air."

"Oh yes! mamma," put in Emmy; "it will do you all the good in the world."

"Of course it will," said Austin. "It is the very thing you need."

The upshot was that Mrs. Waters at last gave a reluctant promise to think the matter over; and Mr. Tovey shortly afterwards went away, perhaps understanding that it would be more judicious not to press the point further for that day.

Emmy appeared to consider the point as good as carried already, for no sooner was the stranger gone than she began descanting on the journey to Dorsetshire, and the sea, and the villa not five minutes from the beach, with a zest which showed that she had fairly set her heart on the expedition. It must be remembered that she had never been ten miles from Chorcombe in her life. But Mrs. Waters was evidently not yet reconciled to the project. Perhaps she understood that argument was of no use against Emmy's impetuosity, for she made no attempt at further protest while the girl was present, merely listening to her rapturous outpourings with a quiet smile. But

the first time that her daughter was out of the room she looked uneasily up from her work, and said :

“I should be much happier to stay with you, Austin.”

“I wish you could, I’m sure. But you see there is really no choice.”

Mrs. Waters sighed, perhaps thinking it rather hard that the first effect of wealth should be to force her away from the husband from whom in poverty she had never been a day parted. She continued to work a little while in silence, then, first casting a quick apprehensive glance round the room, resumed nervously:

“That letter you brought from Bristol the other day—it shows he is really thinking of coming over. And if it was to be while we were away——”

“Oh! but that would make no difference,” said her husband hurriedly. “It would be as easy at that place in Dorsetshire as here, you know—better indeed—yes, now that I think of it, I have no doubt he would very much prefer it.”

“Would you not like to see him too, then?” said Mrs. Waters sadly.

"I? Oh yes! of course, of all things. But I could run down on a flying visit as often as I wished——there, that will do; the thing is settled, and I don't see the use of unsettling it."

Still the wife did not seem satisfied. But before she had time to say more an interruption occurred the nature of which must be recorded in the next chapter.

CHAPTER VII.

Kind Friends.

“OH! if you please, mum, here’s a gentleman as says he’s got something to show you.”

So spoke the rough untutored voice of the charwoman, and immediately afterwards another voice—a very soft suave one this time—was heard saying :

“If you don’t regard the intrusion as too great a liberty, madam.”

And behind the uncouth figure of the charwoman there appeared a well-dressed dapper personage of rather foreign appearance, with smooth clean-shaven mouth and chin, dark hair and whiskers, and black bead-like eyes slightly drawn upwards at the outer corners. A massive Albert chain, with a large bunch of charms,

was stretched across his waistcoat, and assisted Mrs. Waters in recognising him as a Mr. Mossman, proprietor of a flashy-looking jeweller and silversmith's shop, which, with a pawnbroker's business attached, had been recently opened in the old-fashioned village High Street.

"Would you allow me, madam?" he said, gently raising his hand, in which he held a large flat parcel. "It has occurred to me that perhaps at such a time as this it might be a convenience to you to look over a selection of some of our superfine jet ornaments, so much in vogue at the present day among ladies of fashion, whether in or out of mourning."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Waters. "But really I am sorry you have had the trouble, for I am afraid——"

"Trouble, madam! don't mention such a thing. I would not have presumed to take the liberty, only ladies are apt to think it impossible to obtain first-class articles of the kind in a country-place, and it seems a pity that they should be exposed to the inconvenience and delay of sending to London for what they want, when it can be had as good or better on

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the spot. Ah! I ought to feel very much honoured when I think how much annoyance my little establishment has been the means of sparing the ladies of our local aristocracy."

"Are you sure you would not like to look at some of the things?" Austin asked his wife.

"No, thank you, dear, I would really rather not." Mrs. Waters was not given to be prejudiced against any one, but she could not help feeling an instinctive dislike to Mr. Mossman.

Here Emmy re-entered the room, casting a surprised glance towards the stranger, whom she did not at first recognise.

"A—a person who has brought some things for your mamma to look at, my dear," said her father in explanation.

"Perhaps the young lady would like to inspect them," put in Mr. Mossman eagerly. "A few very choice jet ornaments, suitable for fashionable mourning. Allow me to have the honour of showing them, miss; any decision you may or may not come to as to a purchase is quite a minor consideration with me, I assure you."

Emmy looked at her father, and, receiving a

sign of approval, drew near the table with manifest interest, while Mr. Mossman proceeded to open out his parcel.

"It is always a pleasure to submit my articles to be inspected by ladies of taste, miss, because in such quarters I know they are always sure to be appreciated, and that is a sufficient gratification in itself for parties with any feeling for their business. Now here is an elegant set—necklet and bracelets, you see, ladies—first quality, with gold mountings, oh! altogether a sweet article. I never had but two of the pattern, and the other was ordered last week for a lady of title whose name I am not at liberty to mention. You have no idea of the effect, ladies—on a white arm, you know. If you would just allow me to try this bracelet on you, miss——"

Emmy looked again at her father, who smiled and nodded, and immediately one of the bracelets was fastened on her plump round little wrist.

"There, ladies. Well, upon my word I never had an idea of the full effect of a jet ornament till now."

"It is a very pretty pattern, certainly," said Emmy in evident admiration.

"I have not seen a set to compare with it this season," declared Mr. Mossman. "And at such a price too—why, it is ridiculous almost—only eighty-four shillings for the whole set. Gold mountings, you will remember, and attached to the necklet is a little locket for hair or other such memorial—use as well as ornament, you perceive. And so remarkably fashionable at the present crisis."

"Would you like it, Emmy?" inquired Austin; finding his daughter's eyes once more turned towards him.

"I think I should very much, please, papa."

"That is quite enough, my dear," said the father, producing his purse, which an advance from Mr. Podmore had replenished. "And now, Agnes, you must choose something too, come."

"Oh yes! indeed you must, mamma."

Poor Mrs. Waters protested that she needed nothing, but her protestations were of no avail, and the result was that between five and six pounds passed from Austin's pocket into Mr.

Mossman's. As may be supposed, Mr. Mossman was profuse in his expressions of gratitude.

"So very much obliged for your kind patronage, sir," he said as he tied up his parcel again. "It is an honour which will do me a great deal of good in the neighbourhood when it becomes known. If you ever happen to have any further commands for me, ladies—All kinds of jewellery made and repaired, and watch-making in all its branches—In fact, that is a line in which we give particular satisfaction, and I am glad to say are making quite a connection among the chief county families."

"Oh indeed!" said Emmy, for the information seemed to be addressed to her more specially than to anybody else.

"Yes, I can assure you. Why, this very afternoon I have an appointment with a lady of rank near Bristol—If you will allow me, miss, I ought to have the little article somewhere about me now if only I have not forgotten it. I should just like you to see it as a specimen of what we can do."

He fumbled in his pocket, and at last succeeded in finding a small morocco case, out of which

he presently drew a lady's watch and chain.

"An exquisite piece of workmanship, miss, I flatter myself. Would you do me the honour of inspecting it?"

"Oh! what a lovely little watch!" said Emmy, examining it reverently. "Look, papa, this is something like Miss Egerton's that I was telling you of—the one the Clare Court people gave her, you know—only on the back of it she has her initials set in brilliants. And oh! you have no idea how splendid it looks."

"I know exactly the kind of thing you mean, miss," politely put in Mr. Mossman. "Indeed it was only last week I sent home an article precisely such as you describe to one of our principal customers. It certainly has a very sweet effect."

"What would you say, Emmy, if I were to make you a present of a watch just like Miss Egerton's?" inquired her father.

"Papa!" cried Emmy, hardly believing her own ears. "But you are joking, surely. Why, Miss Egerton's watch cost ever so much."

"Joking! what should make you think I am joking?" said Austin a little sharply. "How

soon do you think you could let us have it if I were to give the order, Mr. Mossman—a watch something like that, with chain and all complete, of course, and the initials E. W. set in brilliants on the back?”

“I couldn’t say to a day, sir. But I should hope before the end of the week——”

“Mr. Podmore, please, sir,” said the voice of the charwoman.

And in the next moment there appeared Mr. Podmore himself, who, having been one of the mourners yesterday, had called to inquire after the health of the family.

He shook hands courteously with everybody until he came to Mr. Mossman, at sight of whom his ponderous judicial-looking countenance darkened visibly, while with some sternness he remarked :

“Ah! Mr. Mossman! I did not know you had customers in this house.”

“Mrs. and Miss Waters have been kind enough to examine a few little articles of mine, sir,” replied Mr. Mossman, gathering his property together in some haste. “I have the honour to wish you a very good day, ladies—a

very good day, sir." And with a low bow to each of his patrons, Mr. Mossman made a respectful exit.

"You have not let that fellow talk you over into buying any of his trumpery, I hope," began the lawyer as soon as the door was closed. "He is one of the greatest——ahem, I needn't say more. But I should not advise you to have anything to do with him."

"My wife and daughter have made one or two little purchases," said Austin reluctantly, "but nothing of consequence. Does he really bear such a bad character then?"

Mr. Podmore shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Who would have thought it!" exclaimed Emmy in horror. "And to think how near you were giving him an order for a watch and chain, papa! How very fortunate that Mr. Podmore came in just when he did!"

"Well, if you were near giving him an order for a watch and chain, I should say it was rather fortunate certainly," observed Mr. Podmore drily.

"We ought to be very much obliged to you,

"I am sure," said Mrs Waters, answering for her husband.

"Oh yes! very much obliged," acquiesced Austin. But somehow he did not feel quite so expansively grateful to Mr. Podmore as he ought to have done. He was glad to be rescued from the further wiles of Mr. Mossman, of course, but it was not pleasant to find that he had been in need of rescue, and he was beset by an uneasy feeling that Mr. Podmore was beginning to take the command of him.

"I hope I see Mrs. and Miss Waters pretty well to-day?" inquired Mr. Podmore, addressing himself to the ladies in his most gallant manner. "Delightful weather, is it not? You must try to get out for a little walk this lovely afternoon; it is just what you want after staying so long in doors."

"I am going to send them to the sea-side," said Austin, not sorry to let the lawyer see that he was capable of taking so important a decision on his own responsibility.

"Indeed!" remarked Mr. Podmore. "And are the ladies going to make a long stay?"

"About a month, I think—till the Laurels

can be got ready. I have arranged to take the Laurels furnished for a few months, just while the building is going on."

"Ah yes! the building at Chorcombe Lodge," said Mr. Podmore graciously; "you were consulting me about it the other day, I remember. And I believe I mentioned that I could recommend——"

"Thank you," replied Austin with some internal exultation, "but all that is settled already. Mr. Tovey—Mr. Jupp's cousin he is—has been here this morning, and I have placed the matter entirely in his hands."

"Oh! Mr. Jupp's cousin!" said Mr. Podmore with a visible contraction of the brows. "He called here of his own accord, do you mean?"

"He called here by appointment with me," answered Austin.

"Oh!" said Mr. Podmore, with another contraction of the brows, so prolonged that Austin almost expected an overt expression of dissatisfaction. But if Mr. Podmore had any intention of the kind he thought better of it, and gradually permitted his forehead to smooth itself out again.

"Of course, Mr. Waters, that is an affair entirely within your own control" ("I should say so indeed," thought Austin indignantly), "and I have only to hope that you may have every reason to be satisfied with the arrangement."

"I hope so too," responded Austin a little stiffly, for it seemed to him that Mr. Podmore's expression of hope was nearly tantamount to an implication of doubt.

At this juncture the conversation was interrupted by the arrival of more visitors. This time it was the Rev. Mr. Elkins and Mrs. Elkins who came to pay the tribute of their sympathies and inquiries.

The Rev. Mr. Elkins, the parish clergyman of Chorcombe, was a tall thin parsonic-looking man with straight nose, long flat upper lip, scanty hair and whiskers, and weak grey eyes. Mrs. Elkins was tall and thin also, and as parsonic-looking as it is possible for a lady to be, with tight pinched features, high cheek-bones, and dark iron-grey hair growing half way down her forehead, and arranged in long corkscrew ringlets on each side of her face. It was the first time that she had ever entered that humble par-

lour, but she advanced to shake hands with the inmates as graciously as though she had been at home there all her life.

"How do you do, Mrs. Waters? how do you do, Miss Waters? I hope you are both a little better to-day. Ah!" She accompanied the last words with a slight sigh and a gentle shake of the corkscrew ringlets.

Mrs. Waters and Emmy murmured something about being pretty well, and then, salutations having been duly exchanged with Austin and Mr. Podmore, the whole party got themselves seated—with some little difficulty and confusion, owing to the smallness of the room.

There was a solemn pause, solemnly broken by the Rev. Mr. Elkins.

"Mrs. Elkins and I could not be satisfied without coming to see how you were after your trial. Ah dear! his loss makes a sad blank in our little circle—a sad blank, does it not, Mr. Podmore?"

"Indeed it does," said Mr. Podmore, pulling as long a face as possible.

"And if we who were comparative strangers miss him so much, how infinitely more must he

be missed by those to whom he stood on the footing of a near and dear kinsman!" pursued Mr. Elkins, with a sympathising look towards the bereaved relatives. "Well, it is the common lot—the common lot."

"In the midst of life we are in death," sighed Mrs. Elkins.

"Ah! that is a truth of which we are indeed forcibly reminded on these melancholy occasions," rejoined her husband unctuously. "Life is but a span—three-score and ten years, and how quickly they are gone!"

Austin could not help reflecting that in his uncle's case the three-score and ten had meant eighty-six, but he did not say so, and managed to answer the appeal with a sign of assent.

Perhaps Mr. Elkins thought that it was the pressure of emotion which kept the mourner silent, for he resumed soothingly :

"But you must remember that what has been his loss has been your——what has been your loss has been his gain, I mean. Ah! a precious consolation, to be sure! And if it can be any mitigation of your grief to know how widely it is shared and sympathised with by all classes——

There never was a memory more universally respected—never.”

Austin bowed; as his uncle's heir and representative he felt such an assurance to be somehow personally gratifying and complimentary.

“Oh! it is quite remarkable,” declared Mr. Elkins. “Indeed I have been considering whether it would not be almost a duty, where so much respect is felt, to organize it into some tangible shape.”

Austin looked perplexed.

“A memorial window, or something of that kind, I was thinking of,” the clergyman explained. “If the nucleus of a fund were once formed I am confident that I could obtain quite fifty names for smaller sums—very small sums I dare say they might be, but they would show the spirit of the givers, and that is the principal thing, we all know. And if it would be any gratification to your feelings to put up any little memorial of the sort, I should be very happy to allow it to be associated with Chorcombe church.”

“You are very kind,” said Austin gratefully,

for, though the proposal was rather a bore than otherwise, he felt that Mr. Elkins was paying him a great compliment. "Really I think it might be a very good plan."

"I knew the idea would please you, Mr. Waters. And what do you think then if the large window in the transept——"

"The large window in the transept?" put in Mr. Podmore a little abruptly. "That will come to a good bit of money, won't it?"

"I could not say exactly," replied Mr. Elkins mildly, yet not without a slight accent of reproof. "But it will be easy to make preliminary inquiries in the proper quarters, and if Mr. Waters thought the estimate too high——"

"But I should think nothing of the kind," said Austin, with a reproachful glance at Mr. Podmore for exposing him to so injurious an imputation. "Of course in such a matter I should never dream of grudging any necessary expense."

"But excuse me, Mr. Waters," persisted the lawyer, "you see this is not a necessary expense at all. Those stained windows cost no end of money, and for my part I don't see

what's the good of them except to keep out daylight."

"Oh Mr. Podmore!" exclaimed the clergyman's wife in simpering horror at such an avowal of barbarism. "How can you say such a thing—one of the chief ornaments of ecclesiastical architecture, you know. Well, I am sure Mr. Elkins and I are constantly remarking to each other that a stained window is just the one thing wanted to make our church what it ought to be."

"Oh! it will be an improvement to your church, no doubt," said Mr. Podmore coldly.

"And the church shall have it too," rejoined Austin emphatically, with a look of defiance in the direction of the lawyer. Well, at all events, Mr. and Mrs. Elkins would see that though he was Mr. Podmore's client he was not held in leading-strings by him.

Mr. Elkins expressed his gratification that his little suggestion for honouring the memory of his departed friend should have met with so much approbation, and then the conversation wandered off to other topics—the alterations in Chorcombe Lodge, the Laurels, the sea-side vil-

lage in Dorsetshire, and Mrs. Elkins's ardent hope that after their return she would have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. and Miss Waters very often. After a due time spent thus, during which Mr. Podmore showed no signs of moving (was the man staying to take care of him? Austin once or twice wondered), Mr. and Mrs. Elkins rose to go. Then and not till then Mr. Podmore rose too, and the family trio were once more left sole occupants of the little parlour.

But they had not been long alone when yet another visitor was announced—this time, however, not such an unfamiliar one as those that had just departed, being no other than Olivia Egerton.

She had already been to see her friends during the week of their seclusion, so on the present occasion did not think it necessary to begin either with congratulation or condolence, making her greetings very much as if nothing had happened.

"I have just called to have a little peep at you all on my way home," she said as she took the chair which Emmy had flown to fetch with

all her old alacrity. "I am so glad you are alone ; it would have spoilt the pleasure sadly if anybody had been with you, especially such people as those Elkinses. I met them coming from your house just now ; I suppose they have been making all sorts of pretty speeches."

"They were very kind and polite, certainly," said Austin, who secretly thought Mr. and Mrs. Elkins very nice people indeed, and Miss Egerton's implied distrust of them absurdly unfounded.

"Kind and polite ! Well, that is the most charitable way of putting it, at all events, and perhaps it is very ungrateful of me not to put it so too, for I am sure they have been kind enough and polite enough to me in all conscience. But then I have an uncomfortable fancy all the while that they would not have been nearly so gushing if they had known me in the old time when I was pupil-teacher at Miss Lalande's."

"I almost wonder you care for remembering that time now," remarked Austin gravely. Miss Egerton's fondness for alluding to the details of her past life had always struck him

as strangely undignified, and now that circumstances had made him her equal he thought it only friendly to venture on a mild expostulation.

“What! Mr. Waters, would you have me so thankless as to forget the happiest days of my whole life only because they were the days of my poverty?”

“If they were the days of your poverty, I hardly see how they can have been the happiest of your life,” said Austin, politely, but with a good deal of internal scorn for what seemed to him a rank piece of conventional hypocrisy and affectation.

“Ah! but then there was this charm about the days of my poverty—that they were such gloriously hard-working busy days. I was of some use in those times, and it is so delicious to feel oneself of use. Upon my word it was great fun—always something to think of, always something to try for—the multiplication-table to hammer into Miss Jones, and the French verbs into Miss Smith, and my own practising to squeeze in—I never was in want of subjects of interest then. I was useful, that’s the

long and short of it—useful to Miss Jones and Miss Smith at all events—and it is always pleasant to be spending one's days usefully, even if they are only days of poverty."

Austin was silent. He thought of the days of his poverty and how he had spent them—watching the smoke as it curled up the chimney, or counting the rain-drops as they pattered against the window, or at the best taking aimless walks in and about the village and listening to idle local gossip—and knew that he was not qualified to argue the question. And then for a moment there came as it were wafted across his memory a reminiscence of the far-off days when he was a hard-working clerk in a Liverpool office, as hard-working even as the pupil-teacher in her school, and he was almost ready to acquit Miss Egerton of affectation after all.

Probably it occurred to Olivia to remember how different his experience had been from her own, for she made rather a sudden change of subject, turning round abruptly to ask Emmy :

"Well, Emmy dear, and how are you getting

on? You must be thinking of beginning your practising again soon; I have been missing you dreadfully for the last week."

"Thank you, dear Miss Egerton, I have missed you very much too. But I am afraid I shall not be able to begin again just for the present. Mamma and I are going to spend a few weeks at the sea-side."

"You and your mamma! By yourselves?" asked Olivia in some surprise, for she had never known a separation in the family before.

"Papa is not able to go," explained Emmy. "So mamma and I are to stay by ourselves at a dear little village that has been recommended to us in Dorsetshire, to wait till the Laurels—— Oh! I forgot, you don't know anything about that; we are to live at the Laurels while the building is going on. And oh! what do you think—we have had Mr. Tovey the architect with us this morning, and he says——"

And here Emmy flew off at a tangent to expatiate eloquently on the grandeur of Mr. Tovey's ideas, and it was not till this topic was exhausted that she returned to the subject of the dear

little village in Dorsetshire and expatiated with equal eloquence on that. Mrs. Waters murmured one or two hesitating objections against a scheme to which she was still only half reconciled, but she was soon completely vanquished by the arguments which her husband and daughter jointly brought to bear on her; and Emmy was left mistress of the situation, to describe the imagined charms of Nidbourne in her own way. This she did with the greater gusto as she saw Miss Egerton listening with more than usual appearance of interest.

“I declare, child, you have been talking about the sea till you have made me quite long for it,” said Olivia at last, as Emmy came to a pause from sheer want of breath. “If you and your mamma have really decided to go to this place, I wonder if you would have any objection to let me go with you?”

“You, Miss Egerton!” cried Emmy in ecstasy. “Do you really mean——”

“Yes, I think this Nidbourne would be just the nice little place I should like to rusticate in for a few weeks. And then, you see, going with you I should get a holiday from Mrs. Wad-

dilove" (Mrs. Waddilove was Olivia's companion), "and that will really be a great comfort, to say nothing of the comfort it will probably be to poor Mrs. Waddilove to get a holiday from me. So if you are sure you would quite like it——"

"Like it!" exclaimed Emmy. "Oh! Miss Egerton, it will be delicious."

"It would make us both a great deal happier," said Mrs. Waters, who, reluctant as she was to leave home, felt that absence would at all events be more endurable in the companionship of a friend like Miss Egerton.

"And for me," said Olivia, "I am sure it will be by far the best holiday I have had since Miss Lalande's time—ah! how I used to enjoy my holidays then! Not that it is to be quite a holiday either; we must try to get on with our music and drawing between the walks, you know, Emmy. Very well, we are all agreed, it seems, so we may regard the thing as quite settled."

And from that time the thing was regarded as quite settled. Mrs. Waters and Emmy were to go down to Nidbourne with their friend Miss

Egerton, while Austin stayed behind to give his affairs the advantage of his own personal supervision.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Last Day at the Old Home.

THE next few days were for the whole Waters family a season of unprecedented excitement and confusion. They were on the point of moving from the house which had been their home for twenty-one years; Mrs. Waters and Emmy were moreover preparing for their trip to Nidbourne; and in addition to all this there were a host of minor claims on the family attention in the shape of congratulatory visits, architectural plans and estimates, business interviews with Mr. Podmore, and so on *ad infinitum*. Among other incidents of the time, a watch and chain arrived from Mr. Mossman's, accompanied by a bill for seventy guineas, which bill, with the goods, was immediately returned to him; but there were so many things of greater inter-

est to be attended to that this little unpleasantness was scarcely thought of, and even Mr. Mossman's threats of legal proceedings passed almost unnoticed. In this state of bustle and turmoil nearly a week went by, and at length the day came which was for the present to be the last spent by Mrs. Waters and Emmy in Chorcombe.

It chanced that on the afternoon of that day Emmy was walking home by herself from Egerton Park, where she had been to make an appointment with Miss Egerton for their meeting at Chorcombe station next morning. The weather was bright and spring-like, and Emmy, tripping along the road by the side of the budding hedge-row, thinking of her approaching journey and still more of the glories awaiting her on her return, found the walk very pleasant. After a while, however, she gradually ceased to think of these things, and somehow got thinking instead——

Not that the circumstance of John Thwaites coming into her head at this juncture proved anything, you must understand. She had just passed the opening of the lane which led down

to the mill where he was a clerk, so that the train of thought really suggested itself quite naturally. And besides, had she not that very afternoon been seeing Miss Egerton—Miss Egerton who was always praising him up, and talking as though there was not another young man like him in all England? The idea! As if there were not loads and loads just as nice, and a great deal nicer! as if she herself did not know——But when she tried to reckon up John Thwaites's equals or superiors, somehow their names did not occur to her.

Yes, but then all the young men she knew lived in Chorcombe, and Chorcombe was only a miserable little country village. When she went to London, as her father had promised that she should, and saw all the fine gentlemen of Almack's and Rotten Row——At this point there floated before her a vision of a gallant cavalier mounted high on a curvetting steed and making a bow to her as she passed him on another—such a bow, so low and tender and reverential, as she had once seen Miss Egerton receive from her cousin Mr. Randal on that very road. When did John Thwaites ever make

such a bow as that? Why, she had never seen him on horseback; she doubted even whether——

“Miss Emmy!” said somebody behind her.

She looked round with a great start, and with a greater start still saw, almost close to her side, John Thwaites himself. Considering that he was the identical person of whom she happened to have been thinking, there is no wonder that she found herself a good deal flurried.

“How do you do?” he said in rather a low quavering voice.

“How do you do, Mr. Thwaites?”

Hereupon they shook hands; they had been on hand-shaking terms for years, and could not possibly have done less. But her daintily gloved little hand had scarcely touched his broad sun-burnt fingers before it was released again, so that this was a ceremony very soon performed. And then came a pause, during which both were at a loss as to what to do or say next. They could hardly wish each other good-bye, seeing that both had manifestly been walking in the same direction.

“You are going home, Miss Emmy?” he asked

at last, and of course she had nothing for it but to answer in the affirmative.

"I was going home too," he rejoined. "This is one of my early days for leaving."

With this they both moved onwards, which was certainly a great deal less awkward than standing staring at each other in the middle of the road. But Emmy felt scarcely less flurried now than at first—it was so strange to be walking along side by side with a young man. And besides, only fancy if anybody from the village was to meet them!

They went on for some minutes without speaking—that creature John Thwaites had not a bit of tact—and Emmy was at last compelled to find something to say just to break the silence.

"I hope mamma and I shall have fine weather for our holiday," she began. "We have arranged to go to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" he said, and his voice was still unusually tremulous. "I did not know it was to be so soon. So this is the last time I shall see you for a long while, I suppose?"

As he spoke these words there was something

so profoundly melancholy in his tones that Emmy, out of mere human sympathy, could not help feeling a touch of melancholy too as she replied that she supposed it was.

"I hope you will have a very pleasant time," he said presently.

"Thank you, Mr. Thwaites," and Emmy really felt rather grateful as she made the answer, for she knew that he was speaking sincerely. "I wish the same to you, I am sure."

"To me, Miss Emmy!" He sighed, and walked on a little way in silence, then resumed: "Some people would say I ought to be pleased enough just now, for I've had a great piece of luck to-day—a piece of luck as the world goes, that is."

And then he sighed again very deeply, and Emmy felt wonderfully inclined to sigh too. But she restrained herself, and merely answered, with a little twirl of her parasol:

"Indeed! I am happy to hear it, and so will papa and mamma be, I am certain. And might I ask——"

"I am to be manager—manager with a salary of three hundred a year. Enough to keep me

over and over again, you know. So I ought to be content, of course."

But he was not content evidently, for he gave another sigh, and walked on with his eyes mournfully fixed on the ground.

Emmy did not know how it was, but as he thus spoke of his prospects she began to tremble all over, and had not energy left even to twirl her parasol.

"I am very glad, Mr. Thwaites," she stammered. "I—I congratulate you very much."

"I should have been glad too, a month ago. But I don't care about it one way or the other now."

In saying this he stole one little look towards her, a look which she felt rather than saw, and yet which, though she scarcely saw it, disturbed her strangely. Was he going to say more, or not? She listened intently.

"No, I don't care now," he went on in a hoarse voice. "A month ago I should have died of joy almost. But I don't care now."

A choking sensation rose to her throat. She knew that he was in grief, and knew that she alone could comfort him. And perhaps she was

not altogether indisposed to comfort him, for, happening just then to give a glance upwards, she found her eyes dimmed with something like a tear. At the same moment he gave a glance upwards too, and their eyes met.

She let hers drop again instantly, and bit her lip, while the blood rushed to her cheeks with shame and vexation. Did he think he had found her out then, did he think—All that there was of rebelliousness and resistance in her nature sprang to arms at once. She felt ashamed as she had never felt ashamed before, and, because ashamed, was therefore angry—angry with herself for her momentary weakness, angry with him for having been its cause. And as a consequence of her anger the coquettish spirit which had been so unwontedly soft and yielding a minute ago became suddenly cased in sevenfold hardness.

“Dear me! how strange!” she said with a light little laugh. “I should have thought promotion was as much worth caring for at one time as another.”

There fell on his face a certain pained distressed look very sad to see. But Emmy did

not see it, and perhaps if she had seen it would not have let it make much difference in her conduct.

"Yes, I think we shall have nice weather, really," she went on, by way of changing the subject, looking up at the clouds with as great an appearance of carelessness as she could assume. "I hope so, at least; we shall enjoy ourselves so much if only we have it fine. You never were at Nidbourne perhaps? They say it is such a pretty place."

She forced herself to rattle on thus to cover any vestige of agitation which he might possibly notice in her manner. If she had known how agitated he was himself, she might have spared herself the trouble.

"It will be quite a delightful change for us," she continued. "And when we come back we are to live at the Laurels—till the alterations at Chorcombe Lodge can be finished, you know. I suppose you have not seen Mr. Tovey's plans yet; they look very well, really."

"Indeed!" he managed to say.

"Yes, upon my word they do. He is to make us such a beautiful long ball-room—it will be

quite a pleasure to dance in it. It is an object with us to have a good ball-room, of course, for I fancy we shall be giving balls pretty often now."

She had recovered from all outward signs of agitation by this time, and had no excuse for talking thus, unless it was that there was an evil spirit in her heart which prompted her to tease and torment as much as possible the poor young man who walked by her side. For she knew perfectly well that she had got upon subjects which could not but give him pain, and somehow just because she did know this she felt tempted to go on with them.

"I suppose you will. Yes, no doubt you will be very gay," he made answer in low depressed tones. But the melancholy which had so touched her in his voice a while ago made no impression on her now.

"I expect we shall, rather," she said, toying again with her parasol. "Papa talks of taking us up to London for a season, and that is a promise I shall not let him forget, you may be sure. I do so long to see London, you can't think, to say nothing of the parks and balls and operas.

And I shouldn't wonder much if we were to go on to Paris."

She had got the whip firmly in her hand, and, as she was by no means tired of using it, there is no saying how many more lashes she might have given her victim if he had not found an opportunity of escape. But fortunately for him they had by this time reached a point where the highway, now just entering the outskirts of the village, branched into two roads, one leading straight into Chorcombe High Street, and consequently Emmy's nearest way home—the other winding round by outlying farms and homesteads which constituted a kind of suburban district. Here John Thwaites, having endured till he could endure no more, came to a pause.

"I think I must say good-bye now. I have some business up this way."

"Oh! have you?" said Emmy with a negligent elevation of the eyebrows. "Good afternoon, then, Mr. Thwaites."

"Good afternoon, Miss Emmy."

At first it seemed that he was going away without so much as shaking hands, nor perhaps

would he have been wholly without excuse if he had done so, all her fingers being occupied in the undoing of a knot into which she had worked the tassel of her parasol. But apparently he could not bring himself to part so coldly, for after a slight hesitation he held out his hand, and, as hers for an instant rested in it, murmured two or three inarticulate words that sounded like "God bless you."

And then he was gone.

Emmy might walk on now without fear of what might be said in case of a meeting with the most malicious gossip of all the neighbourhood. She had got rid of that creature John Thwaites, and not only had got rid of him, but had snubbed him and vexed him and put him down in such style as completely to avenge any and all annoyance which she might at any time have suffered by his means. How strange then that under these circumstances she no sooner found herself alone than she was ready to burst into tears!

Yes, actually ready to burst into tears, and so probably she would have done only that she was approaching the region of shops and houses

where she felt herself the observed of all observers. It was necessary to be circumspect, and, holding her parasol before her face, she walked on with her head very erect, trying to think of the triumphs in store for her in London and Paris. But she did not succeed in fixing her ideas as she could have wished, and, as she penetrated further into the village, held her parasol closer and closer to her face, walking very fast to make people think that she was in a hurry.

Whether or not by reason of this precaution, she reached home without being accosted, and, hastily passing by the parlour door, ran upstairs to her own room. She was longing to be alone.

But just as she was about to enter, she heard her mother's voice calling her from the adjoining chamber, and was obliged to answer :

“Well, mamma dear?”

“You can come in, Emmy.”

With some reluctance, and a little previous manipulation of her pocket-handkerchief, Emmy obeyed, and presently stood in her mother's bed-room, where Mrs. Waters was engaged in

the double task of packing for the journey and arranging her things for removal.

"What did you want to say, dear?" asked Mrs. Waters, who had made the not unnatural mistake of thinking that her daughter had come upstairs to look for her.

"Oh! nothing particular," said Emmy, fiddling with her bonnet-strings. "Miss Egerton will be at the station at ten to-morrow morning—that is all, I think. Well, and what have you been doing, mamma? Ah! you have nearly cleared out the closet."

She stepped forward to view the interior of an empty closet at the further end of the little room, not because she really took any interest in it, but because she had thus an excuse for standing with her back to her mother.

"Yes, dear. And stowed away everything in the chest of drawers, ready to be taken into the new house."

"I see," said Emmy, with a languid glance at a little mahogany chest of drawers that stood in a corner hard by—it was a relic from the old Liverpool days, and was one of the few

pieces of good furniture in the family possession.

“And how have you been enjoying your walk this fine day, Emmy?”

Emmy felt a sudden catching of the breath, and had some difficulty in finding voice to answer.

“Very much, mamma, thank you,” she replied after a brief pause, and then added quickly, before her mother had time to go on with the subject: “Oh! what a nice writing-case you have here, mamma! Where did you get it?”

She drew a step nearer the chest of drawers as she spoke (she was able to do so without turning her head), and stood contemplating with great apparent interest a leather writing-case which lay in one of the open drawers. She was still standing with her back to her mother, else she might have noticed with some surprise that Mrs. Waters all at once became very much flushed.

“I have had it by me some time,” was the answer, given in rather low faltering accents.

But Emmy was too much engaged in study-

ing how to seem natural herself to notice any peculiarity in her mother's manner.


"Indeed—I wonder I have never seen it before. And are you going to leave it behind then? I should have thought it the very thing for travelling with."

"I—I have so few letters to write, you know, dear."

"Ah yes! to be sure. And now, mamma, I think I will go and take off my bonnet."

With these words Emmy somewhat abruptly wheeled round, and by a dexterous evolution managed to get to the door without having occasion to look her mother fairly in the face. In another minute she was in her own room, endeavouring to compose herself after her flurry, and assuredly with no further thought about the leather writing-case.

The subject, however, was not so quickly forgotten by Mrs. Waters. Scarcely had her daughter left the room when, having first softly secured the door, she too advanced to the chest of drawers and stood contemplating the writing-case. Nor did her interest stop here, for presently she drew a bunch of keys from her



pocket, and, fitting one into the lock, threw back the leathern lid.

A quantity of unused note-paper and loose manuscript jottings were lying uppermost, but, passing by all these, Mrs. Waters drew out a folded letter, with a faded superscription evidently written many years ago. She did not unfold it, but merely stood poising it in her hand, and gazing at the yellow characters of the address with eyes which, as she looked, became dimmed with tears.

After a while she raised them and glanced wistfully at the grate, half filled with the charred fragments of old letters and tradesmen's bills which she had that morning been destroying. Then she glanced back again at the letter, and for an instant her fingers closed on it as though about to tear it in two.

But in the next moment her fingers relaxed. She shook her head sadly, and with a sigh slowly replaced the letter where she had found it, among the loose papers in the writing-case, which she locked and in its turn replaced in the drawer where it had first attracted Emmy's attention. And finally, having carefully covered

up the case from view, she shut the drawer, taking particular pains to see that it was properly fastened.

CHAPTER IX.

Mr. Graham.

A RED-TILED fishing village deposited in front of an amphitheatre of green hills that swelled upwards on north, east, and west, with just the rudimentary beginnings of a fashionable sea-side resort in the shape of a tiny esplanade and a few groups of white-stuccoed houses at one end—such was the place which is here to be called Nidbourne.

A pleasant place it was, set in the midst of pleasant sights of sea and shore. Here the beach with the long line of ever-shifting waves which seemed to be perpetually attacking, and the steadfast rampart of verdant-crested cliffs which seemed to be perpetually resisting; there sunny breezy stretches of hill-side, where the sheep cropped the short grass shorter still, and

shady nooks where the dark fern leaves might hang all day without being stirred by a breath of wind, and waving woods whose flickering green network opened every now and then to show a glimpse of the distant horizon line where the blue of the sky melted into the deeper blue of the waters. By the general character of its scenery Nidbourne belonged not so much to Dorset as to Devon, from the borders of which county it was indeed not very remote.

In this quiet sequestered spot the three ladies from Chorcombe found the bright spring days pass on the whole very happily. The repose and seclusion of her life here was just what poor Mrs. Waters most needed after the anxiety and excitement she had lately gone through, and, much as this first separation from her husband pained her, she could not help taking more or less pleasure in the natural beauties around her. As for Emmy, she might perhaps have preferred a place where some little fashionable activity was going forward; yet even Emmy could not but enjoy rambling about on the beach and the hills at Nidbourne. For her nerves had quite recovered now from the temporary disorder by

which they had been so strangely attacked on that last afternoon at Chorcombe—quite recovered at least if we except one or two occasions on which the song of the nightingale, or the silver sparkle of moonlight on the rising and falling waves, made her feel a little more sentimental than usual. But indeed she had small leisure to be sentimental even had she been that way inclined; the energy of Olivia, as self-elected governess, keeping her constantly employed—now with her piano, now with sketching out of doors or at the open window, so that not a minute of the day was lost. The so-called holiday was in truth a season of pretty close application, not only for Emmy, but also for Olivia, who worked quite as hard at teaching as her pupil did at learning. But Olivia enjoyed her visit to Nidbourne none the less on that account, rather all the more, often declaring that she had spent no such happy time since the old days at Miss Lalande's. Thus, so far as she was concerned, Olivia was certainly not sorry that, when the appointed time arrived for returning to Chorcombe, it was reported thence that the Laurels could not be got ready

for at least another fortnight or three weeks.

About ten days of this supplementary time had elapsed—passing as pleasantly as those which had preceded them—when one morning as the three ladies were at breakfast Emmy noticed that Mrs. Waters, who had just received a letter from her husband, did not read any part of it aloud as usual, but silently put it into her pocket on finishing it with rather a grave and abstracted look.

“All is well at home, I hope?” asked Emmy, not without some little anxiety.

Mrs. Waters roused herself.

“Oh yes! all quite well, and the building going on nicely.” She was silent again for a little, then resumed, somewhat hesitatingly:

“It seems likely that—that we may have a friend coming to see us in the course of a day or two. A Mr. Graham—an old friend who went out to India a great many years ago—he has written to your papa to say he has come to England on business, and——”

“Mr. Graham, mamma! I never heard of him before.”

“He went away so many years ago,” said

Mrs. Waters in a tone half of apology. "But he is a very old friend."

"And is he coming to see us, did you say, mamma? All the way to Nidbourne on purpose to see us?" asked Emmy in amazement.

"And—and for the sake of the sea air, you know, dear. It seems he has done his business, and has a few days to spare before starting, so as Nidbourne is such a pretty place——"

"How strange that I should never have heard of him before!" exclaimed Emmy, meditating on the subject with increasing wonderment. "A Mr. Graham! What is his Christian name?"

At first it seemed almost as though Mrs. Waters had forgotten it, for she remained some moments without speaking.

"His Christian name is Henry," she answered at length.

"And he has come over from India on business, you say, mamma? What is he then?"

"An engineer," replied Mrs. Waters, still in a rather low wavering voice—"partner in a large firm. He is considered very clever, I believe, and has been sent over to inspect models

for some important works they are going to begin."

"It is really very strange!" reiterated Emmy.
"And is he alone, or does he bring a Mrs. Graham with him?"

"He is not married, my dear."

"If he is not married, I wonder he has not found time to write to you and papa in all these years. I don't remember ever seeing you get a letter from him."

"Perhaps not—I don't know. People who are busy have so little time for writing that—
Another cup, Miss Egerton?"

There were a great many more questions that Emmy would have liked to ask, but she restrained herself, partly because, reminded of Miss Egerton's presence, she did not wish to appear too inquisitive, partly because she thought it best for her purpose to make her inquiries gradually. But though she suffered the subject to drop for the present out of the conversation, she could not help, spoilt child as she was, recurring to it in her own mind with a certain sense of jealous mortification at being so completely taken by surprise. How very odd that she should

never have heard of this Mr. Graham before—a person who now turned out to be an intimate friend of her father and mother! Who could he be? and where could they have got acquainted with him? Really it almost looked as if they must have purposely made a secret of his existence, or how was it that she had never known at least that they had a friend in India? And she had never known that they had a friend or acquaintance anywhere out of England—unless indeed it was that horrible Uncle Harold who long, long ago had fled to some far-away country, America or Australia, or——Or India perhaps——But no, that was quite impossible; her father and mother respected themselves too much to keep up any connection with such a character, and as for introducing him as a personal friend, and under a false name too——The idea was utterly ridiculous, and it was only a pity it had ever come into her head. After all, what was more natural than that they should have a friend she had never happened to hear them speak of? People cannot be always talking of their past life—and for that matter, perhaps his name had been mentioned a dozen times in her presence

without her having chanced to notice it. She was quite annoyed with herself for letting such an absurd fancy get hold of her for an instant—a fancy which she felt to be almost an insult to her parents—and was ready to wish that Mr. Graham, whoever he was, had never existed.

There was another besides Emmy ready to wish something of the same sort, and that other was Olivia Egerton. Not that her uncharitable feelings towards Mr. Graham were in the slightest degree due to any such suspicions as those which disturbed Emmy; a comparative stranger to Chorcombe, she knew nothing about the person whom Emmy thought of with horror as her uncle Harold. But Olivia was enjoying herself in this pleasant sea-side retreat with her two friends as she had not enjoyed herself for years, and was naturally annoyed at the idea of having her enjoyment spoilt by the intrusion of a stranger.

“If the man really comes, there will be an end to every bit of pleasure,” she thought to herself petulantly. “Was there ever anything so tiresome—just when we were getting on so

nicely! And I know so exactly what he will be—a creature without an idea in his head beyond money-making on the one hand, and brainless dissipation that he calls society on the other—a compound of the City clerk and the heavy swell, like all the Anglo-Indians I ever saw, except the officers, and they are made up of the heavy-swell element pure and simple. Most provoking to be sure. Well, he isn't here yet, and we must just hope he may change his mind and let us off after all."

And, thus endeavouring to console herself, Olivia set about her ordinary avocations—that is to say, she spent the day till dinner-time in the open air, walking and talking and sketching and superintending the sketching of her pupil. And after the early dinner she sat down as usual by the piano, to give Emmy her music lesson.

The lesson that day was up to a certain point a very prosperous one, partly perhaps because Mrs. Waters had gone out to do some shopping in the village, and both teacher and learner were able to feel entirely unrestrained and at their ease. Be this how it may, certain it is

that Emmy played some difficult passages with more than usual spirit, and that Olivia was more than usually warm in her expressions of encouragement.

“ Good—very good—a little faster—one, two, three—so, that’s it—decrecendo—pianissimo—don’t forget the rallentando—very good—now a tempo again—faster, faster—don’t be afraid—allegro viv——”

Olivia suddenly broke off, and Emmy’s hand as suddenly fell from the keys. A third person was in the room—a visitor who, mumblingly announced by a rustic maid-servant, had entered unperceived, and had been obliged to advance to within a few steps of the piano in order to make his presence known.


Olivia and Emmy were too much put out by the unlooked-for appearance of a stranger to be able to ask any questions as to his name or business; and, as he on his side seemed at least equally embarrassed, there were a few seconds during which they could only sit contemplating him in unfeigned wonder and curiosity.

He was a tall powerfully made man, with

dark hair and eyes, and apparently about forty years old more or less, gentlemanly in demeanour, though somewhat rugged-looking, as one who cares little for appearance, and who has spent much of his time under exposure to sun and wind. For the rest, his features were such as, if they had been a little less bronzed, might have been called handsome but for certain deep lines which care or thought had marked on the forehead, and which imparted something of sternness to the whole face—sternness only partially redeemed by the dark light of deep hazel eyes more than usually clear and expressive.

“I am afraid there must be some mistake,” he said at last, looking round not without a shade of nervousness in his manner. “I came to see Mrs. Waters, but——”

“Oh no! there is no mistake,” answered Olivia graciously, for she had just bethought herself of the Mr. Graham whose expected arrival had been announced that morning. “Mrs. Waters is out just now, but if you don’t mind waiting——Miss Waters and I are expecting her back every minute.”



"This is Miss Waters?" said the stranger, and turned rather an observant glance on Emmy.

Emmy, to whom the idea of Mr. Graham had also occurred, and who happened to be looking towards him at the time, saw the glance, and as she saw it there occurred to her likewise that other idea which had come into her head in the morning. And though she was quite sure that the idea was preposterously unfounded, she could not help taking a slight prejudice against the visitor on the strength of it, even before she knew whether he was Mr. Graham or not.

"Pray sit down," said Olivia politely, and, still with a shade of nervousness, the visitor obeyed. The two ladies came away from the piano, and seated themselves likewise, and then followed an embarrassing silence, which Olivia, now fully restored to self-possession, was the first to break.

"Mrs. Waters told us this morning that she was expecting to see an old friend from India in the course of the next day or two—Mr. Graham I think she said. I suppose"—and here

she looked at the new-comer with an air of courteous inquiry.

"My name is Graham, yes," he made answer. "I—I am afraid I am interrupting the lesson," he added, with an uneasy look towards the door, as though he would not have been sorry to get away.

"Pray don't mention it," rejoined Olivia. She waited an instant to give Emmy an opportunity of putting in a word of civil greeting to her mother's friend, but Emmy was sitting shy and silent with evidently no notion of doing the honours, and Olivia had nothing for it but to resume. "Mrs. Waters will be very glad to see you, I am sure. You have been a great many years absent from England, I believe?"

"Yes, a very great many years."

It was apparent that the conversational initiative was to be thrown entirely upon Olivia. She felt this to be rather unfair, but prepared to do her best under the circumstances.

"And you like India very much, no doubt—people who have been there always do, I think. May I ask what part you have lived in most?"

"I am sometimes obliged to be up the coun-

try for months together. But my head-quarters are at Bombay."

"Bombay—then you don't live out of the world, at all events. I suppose Bombay is a very gay place."

"I hardly know—I suppose so—oh yes! of course."

"You speak as if you did not avail yourself much of its advantages in that respect," said Olivia, a little inquisitively.

"I! Oh dear no! I don't care for such things at all."

So it appeared that there was nothing in him of the heavy-swell element at any rate, though indeed his manifest embarrassment in ladies' society had sufficiently proved that already. Did he only consist of the City clerk then? Olivia could not make him out at all. There was a new interval of silence, during which she was fain to admit to herself that the heavy-swell element has its conveniences for the purposes of conversation. If the man had been a fop, or only half a fop, she would at least have known what to say, but now——She could not talk business to him, and probably he could

talk of nothing else. Not that he exactly looked of the City clerk type either—but then Olivia knew so well what those Anglo-Indians were.

Meanwhile the silence was becoming quite oppressive. Its oppressiveness seemed to be felt at last even by Mr. Graham, for, after sitting some time with his eyes fixed on the ground, he looked up and cast them with a restless motion round the room, as though seeking something that should help him out of his difficulty. After a while they fastened on a chalk landscape drawing that stood propped on a small portable easel at the further end of the room.

“That is intended for a sketch of the view from this window?” he inquired, evidently with something of an effort, but he was reduced to help himself now that Olivia would no longer help him.

“That is certainly what it was intended for,” said Olivia, with a smile at the wording of the question. “Dear me, Emmy, I am afraid it looks as if the intention had not been carried out very successfully.”

"It is a sketch by Miss Waters then?" he rejoined, with another glance at Emmy.

"Yes," said Olivia, "and we had rather flattered ourselves it was a tolerable specimen of its kind. I do hope you will be able to admire it a little."

"I will see it closer if you will allow me."

He went up to the easel, and stood looking at the sketch for some time, but without making any remark. It occurred to Olivia that perhaps his silence was a judicious mode of concealing entire artistic ignorance.

"And are these other drawings also by Miss Waters?" he asked next, pointing to an open portfolio that lay on a table close at hand.

"Yes, or most of them at least," said Olivia. "Oh yes! you may look at them if you like."

He turned over two or three of the drawings which came first to hand, laying them down again with an absence of remark that piqued Emmy not a little, while it confirmed Olivia in her previous suspicion as to the reason of his silence. At length he came to one which he looked at longer and more closely than any of the others, while his face lighted up

with an expression of something like interest.

"There is something more than intention here," he said, after a minute or two spent in examination. "The view from the window again, I see, but very differently treated. This is not yours surely?" he added with a doubtful look at Emmy.

"Oh no! that is not mine," answered Emmy, with a decided pout on her rosy lips, for she felt quite insulted by the low opinion of her abilities which the tone and manner of the question implied. "That is Miss Egerton's, of course."

"Yours?" said the visitor, glancing from the drawing to Olivia, and then back to the drawing again.

"I am glad you like it," said Olivia modestly, but not without some internal self-complacency, for after such a proof of discrimination she could not help feeling a sudden respect for Mr. Graham's critical powers. "I should be rather pleased with it myself, if it were not for something about those hills in the back-ground—I have always felt there was a mistake somewhere, and yet I can't tell exactly what it is."

He directed a quick scrutinising look at the natural landscape without, and then once more brought back his attention to the sketch.

“You have not allowed quite enough for the space between that furthest peak and the ridge in front,” he pronounced presently, “and the slope here is not exactly what it ought to be. If this line were brought a little lower, and this other so—” and here he passed the blunt end of a pencil lightly across the paper—“I believe you would need nothing more to put it right.”

“I think I understand,” said Olivia, who indeed fancied that she saw the way to making a very great improvement in the correctness of her work. “Let me see; this line so, and this other so—Is that what you mean?”

“Not quite at such an acute angle, that would be going too far the other way. I am afraid I shall injure your drawing if I touch it, but if you could give me a piece of note-paper—Oh! thank you, this will do nicely.”

He took a sheet of paper which Olivia handed to him, wrapped it to steady it round a small book which he drew from his pocket, and went to the window, where he stood copying down

the outline of the distant hills, while Olivia and Emmy awaited the result in respectful silence. Olivia could not help feeling a good deal surprised. It really did seem as if the man was capable of taking interest in something besides his business.

"That is what I mean, or something like what I mean, at least," he said after a few minutes, and handed to Olivia the paper, still wrapped round the book which had been his improvised easel.

"Why, that is the very effect I had been trying for without being able to get it," exclaimed Olivia in undisguised admiration. "What a wonderfully correct eye you must have!"

"A little knowledge of drawing is so necessary in my business that I am obliged to cultivate it as much as I can."

"Ah yes! to be sure, your business," said Olivia; then, conscious of having spoken with a touch of superciliousness quite uncalled for under the circumstances, she hastened to add: "You must have always had a strong taste for drawing, at any rate."

"I don't know about always," he answered

with a half smile. "But since I have been obliged to make it a study I have certainly learned to get very fond of it."

On hearing him thus speak of the facility he undoubtedly possessed as of a comparatively recent acquisition, Olivia was again a little surprised. Had he ever had any stronger tastes, then, before being obliged to cultivate this one?

"I will set about altering my drawing at once," she said aloud. "I may keep this paper by me as a guide, I suppose? But stop, this is your book, I think."

She handed him the little volume round which the paper had been wrapped. In doing so her eye caught the lettering on the back, and with greater surprise than ever she saw that it was a pocket edition of some Greek classic. She had never imagined to herself a man of business who should be a classical student as well, and felt for once thrown quite out of her reckoning.

She was just thinking what she could appropriately say by way of carrying on the conversation—and somehow her standard of appropriateness was by this time much higher than



it had been at first—when the door opened, and she was relieved of her difficulty by the entrance of Mrs. Waters.

On discovering the unexpected presence of a stranger Mrs. Waters was visibly startled—so much startled indeed that she turned unwontedly pale, and for a moment stood as it were transfixed just within the threshold. Mr. Graham on his part seemed a good deal confused also (how entirely unused to society he evidently was!), and an awkward pause ensued without greetings being exchanged on either side. At last, though with perceptible nervousness, he made a step forward, and extending his hand said, a little more tremulously than he had yet spoken :

“Mrs. Waters, I am glad to see you again.”

“How do you do, Mr. Graham?” she said faintly. But it was manifest that she had not yet recovered from her surprise.

They shook hands, and then after another awkward little pause she regained sufficient self-possession to murmur something about taking a chair, and both sat down. Emmy seated herself too, close to her mother, while

Olivia, seeing that she was released from all further duties of hostess-ship, and judging indeed that it would be in better taste to leave her friends and their visitor to themselves, retreated to the further end of the room and busied herself in the correction of her drawing.

It has been said that Emmy seated herself close to Mrs. Waters—perhaps not altogether uninfluenced by the consideration that thus she could see and hear all that passed between her mother and the mysterious stranger. For Emmy was naturally of an inquisitive turn, and her curiosity on the present occasion had been worked up to its highest pitch. She had not failed to notice her mother's agitation, and though she was aware that Mrs. Waters, living for years a quiet, out-of-the-world life, was apt to be flurried by the presence of visitors, she could not help reverting to the suspicions of the morning, and wondering, more seriously than she had wondered yet, whether there could really be anything in them. So it need not be said that she watched and listened with all her eyes and ears, and Emmy's eyes were very bright and her ears very sharp.

It was some little time before anything further was said on either side, but presently Mrs. Waters, with a momentary look at Emmy, began timidly :

"I heard from Austin—from my husband—this morning that we were likely soon to see you—to have the pleasure of seeing you. You are thinking of staying some time at Nidbourne, I believe?"

"About a fortnight, I think. I must leave in time to catch the next mail from Southampton."

"You are going to leave England again so soon?" and Emmy fancied that she detected a slight intonation of regret in her mother's voice. But then it might have been partly for the sake of politeness.

"I must," answered the visitor. He looked at Emmy, and hesitated, then went on : "I hope Mr. Waters was quite well when you heard?"

"Quite well, thank you," said Mrs. Waters. Emmy listened to hear if she asked after any friends of Mr. Graham's in return, but she did not, only adding : "I think you will find you

have made a good choice in coming to Nidbourne. It is a very nice place."

"So it seems. You have been here some time, I think?"

"Yes, more than a month. It has been an exceedingly pleasant change."

"I suppose it has. You live in a very pretty situation."

"Oh! very much so indeed."

How stiff and ceremonious they were, to be sure! It seemed impossible that this could be the conversation of two persons who had ever stood in any near relation to each other—the relation of brother and sister, for instance. Oh! surely it was quite impossible. And yet—Emmy was very acute, but she was also very inexperienced, and felt fairly nonplussed.

The dialogue went on in this style for some time longer, very heavily and draggingly, and with long pauses as though even the formal platitudes which were all that the speakers found to say cost them some trouble to bring forth. Emmy was almost sure that those suspicions of hers were all nonsense. At length Mr. Graham, as though in despair of being able to carry on

the conversation further, looked at his watch, and rose to take leave. Mrs. Waters did not say a word to induce him to remain, and rose too, with a promptitude which to Emmy, a country girl accustomed to see a great deal of pressing, seemed strangely cold and inhospitable. Perhaps the same idea occurred to Mrs. Waters herself, for as he made his adieux she said, rather timidly and undecidedly :

“I hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing you often during your stay. You could come and dine with us to-morrow, perhaps—two o’clock is our hour.”

“Thank you, I shall be very glad.”

Thus the invitation was given and accepted, and even Emmy thought that her mother could hardly have done less than make some arrangement of the sort.

It was Emmy’s turn to shake hands with the visitor next, which she did rather coldly, for it is always difficult to forgive a person who has once been the object of a prejudice, even though a mistaken one. This done, he made a step towards the door, then halted, and turned hesitatingly in the direction of Olivia. Olivia had

just raised her eyes from her drawing, so that each saw the other looking. He wavered still for an instant, then, deciding hastily, went forward to take leave of her also.

“Good morning,” he said, and, after another moment of uncertainty, he shook hands with her as he had done with Mrs. Waters and Emmy. “I ought to apologise for taking up so much of your and your pupil’s time.”

“Oh! not at all,” said Olivia. “I ought rather to thank you for so kindly putting my sketch right. It is an immense improvement.”

“You have done it already!” and he glanced down at the drawing with evident surprise at her rapidity, not unmixed with gratification. “Yes, that is exactly—I am very glad to have been of a little use to you, though you would have found it out for yourself, of course. But now I must not disturb you longer.”

He bowed and Olivia bowed, and in another minute he was out of the room. Mrs. Waters followed him to the landing just to see if the servant was in attendance, but she was back again almost directly, and the three ladies were

left together to criticise the departed visitor as they would.

The only person, however, who seemed inclined to say much in the way of criticism was Emmy.

"What a queer person!" she commented, as soon as he was out of hearing.

"Do you think so, my dear?" said her mother, with rather a feeble smile.

Olivia made no remark.

"A very queer person indeed," rejoined Emmy emphatically. "One would think to see him he had been a hermit all his life—so awkward and blunt—and quite rude too sometimes, I declare" (here Emmy was thinking of his implied disparagement of her sketches). "Well, he may be very nice and all that, but I can't say I more than half like him myself. And oh! did you notice the absurd mistake he made—actually talking to Miss Egerton about her pupil! I believe the stupid creature takes her for my governess."

"How awful!" said Olivia with a silvery laugh. "Quite a frightful calamity really." She became silent for a few seconds, reflecting

with an air of unusual gravity. Presently she spoke again, this time with what appeared to be a touch of embarrassment, while a very becoming flush rose to her cheeks. "Seriously though, as he seems to have got the notion into his head—and it is a natural notion enough under the circumstances—I should be very glad if—if you could manage not to undeceive him. It is so pleasant to leave one's pomps and vanities behind for a little."

"Oh! Miss Egerton!" remonstrated Emmy. "Do you mean to say you really wish people to think——"

"I really do, child," answered Olivia, with a slight deepening of the flush. "I hate to be ticketed as a great personage—you ought to know that by this time. So, as a favour, I beg that you will let people take me for whatever they may think I look like—and this Mr. Graham among the rest."

"Oh! of course if it is to please you, Miss Egerton——"

"It is to please me," persisted Olivia. "And you, Mrs. Waters, you will oblige me, I am sure? It is such a delightful reminder of old days to

be taken for a governess ; I would not have the illusion destroyed for the world."

Mrs. Waters did not exactly see the importance of the point one way or the other. But of course she could not refuse a wish urged by her friend with so much earnestness, and Olivia obtained the required promise.

"I am so much obliged to you," she declared. "Those royal robes are horribly stifling, and it is such a comfort to get them off! No wonder Haroun Alraschid enjoyed those incognito walks of his."

"But he didn't take them for enjoyment," put in Emmy ; "he wanted to find out what people thought of him."

"Ah ! to be sure, so he did," said Olivia.

CHAPTER X.

A Sou'-Wester.

THE weather had been very fine at Nidbourne for the last month, but on the morning following that of Mr. Graham's arrival came a change. A breeze sprang up during the night, which gradually increased to a gale, and by the time Olivia and her friends were stirring, it was evident that the day was to be a boisterous one. The sky was sunless and lowering, with dark grey masses of cloud sweeping over its face from the south-west; the wind rushed against the walls of the house in wild prolonged gusts, like a living thing attacking them, while, outside, the trees and even the very blades of grass might be seen bending and quivering with every fresh onslaught. Meantime at a little distance (for the house was situated some way back

from the beach) there was heard above the loudest whistling of the blast the dull steady roar of an angry sea.

However, the ladies were not to be thus deterred from their accustomed exercise. Olivia and Emmy indeed staid in doors for half-an-hour or so after breakfast, but only in order to make sure of a music-lesson, of which the expected company of Mr. Graham might balk them in the afternoon. As soon as this was over they went out to join Mrs. Waters, who, having some marketing to do, had not waited for them, but had arranged to meet them on the parade.

Turning their faces resolutely towards the wind, the two friends battled their way down to the front of the village, and at length emerged on an open space looking on the sea. The sight they saw there was certainly worth seeing. Near the shore the great powerful waves, lashed into fury by the bluster overhead, curled their huge necks and hurled themselves with blind bull-like energy on the beach, threw up a white shower of foam as though in anger at their own impotence, and then with a mighty

noise of seething seas and rattling boulders rushed back to prepare for another attack. Away from the shore, under a grim scowling sky, tumbled and tossed in infinite desolation a boundless waste of grey deserted waters—grey save for the breakers that streaked them here and there with ominous white, and deserted save for one or two diminishing specks on the leaden line of the horizon. Far and near everything that met the eye was suggestive of the reserve forces of nature.

Olivia and Emmy stood contemplating the prospect for some time, and then, bethinking themselves that Mrs. Waters would probably be waiting, hastened along to the strip of terraced walk dignified with the name of parade. This said parade was not more than a hundred yards in length, and as just now there were hardly half-a-dozen people on it (this was the dead season at Nidbourne), a glance was enough to show whether the person sought for was among them.

“That is mamma—I know her by her shawl. And so she has actually met that Mr. Graham!”

As Emmy spoke, she jerked her head rather viciously in the direction of a lady and gentleman who, apparently earnestly engaged in conversation, were walking a little way in front. For a moment she felt awfully suspicious; so suspicious that she was ashamed of herself directly afterwards. It was natural enough when she came to think of it that her mother should have met Mr. Graham on the parade; the parade was just the place for accidental meetings. And of course when one met an old friend it was necessary to speak.

On discovering the pair in front, Olivia and Emmy quickened their pace in order to come up with them. But Mrs. Waters and her companion still walked on, evidently too much engrossed in what they were saying to vouchsafe a look round. As Emmy noticed this, she remembered the few stilted sentences in which their conversation had been carried on in her presence, and again that horrid idea of yesterday morning came rushing into her mind. She was conscious of a feeling of positive dislike to Mr. Graham.

The earnestness with which the two seemed

to be conversing must really have been rather marked, for it struck not Emmy only, but Olivia. As has already been said, Olivia was not sufficiently acquainted with the details of the family history to suspect what Emmy suspected, but she certainly observed that the discourse of the couple before her, whatever it was, appeared to be very interesting. It even passed through her head to wonder whether peradventure Mr. Graham could be one for whom in past days Mrs. Waters might have entertained a feeling deeper than mere friendship, and for whom, for the sake of those past days, she still could not help keeping up a trace of sentimental regard. But then Olivia remembered that according to all appearance Mrs. Waters must be several years older than the stranger, and she rejected the notion as altogether wild and untenable. Nor was it entirely without a sensation of relief on her friend's account that she found herself able thus to regard it.

"Mamma!" cried Emmy at last impatiently.

She and Olivia were by this time almost close to those in front; so close that Mrs. Waters

heard in spite of the high wind, and with a start stopped and turned her head.

"Why, Emmy!" she said, smiling, though perhaps rather artificially. "I have just met Mr. Graham, you see."

"We have been following you ever so long, mamma," said Emmy, with somewhat of an aggrieved air; "I thought you were never going to look round. Ah! how do you do?" she added coldly, as Mr. Graham stepped forward to greet her.

Olivia was standing a pace or two behind, and thought that perhaps Mr. Graham might altogether forget to notice her. But no sooner had he exchanged salutations with Emmy than he made another step forward in the direction of Emmy's companion, and, though again with a little apparent embarrassment and constraint, shook hands with her as he had done yesterday. Perhaps owing to the infectiousness of example (for she was not naturally shy), Olivia felt slightly embarrassed and constrained also, and the ceremony was gone through in rather an awkward silence. The silence might have continued some time longer, for neither Mrs. Waters

nor Emmy seemed inclined to break it, had not the wind come to the relief of all four by blowing a corner of Olivia's shawl over her head in such unceremonious fashion that she could not but laugh in disengaging herself.

"What a stormy morning!" she exclaimed, as with reddening cheeks she drew round her arm the refractory corner which Mr. Graham had helped to capture. "I am afraid this will give you a very unfavourable idea of Nidbourne weather."

"No, I think I have been rather enjoying it than otherwise. I have been watching the sea all morning."

"We have been watching it too—Miss Waters and I. Thank you, I am quite comfortable now. It seems a very selfish thing to say, but I do like a rough sea—to look at, at least. But what a sudden change since yesterday!"

"It seems sudden, yes. Still I rather expected it from the look of the sea in the evening."

"Dear me, and I was saying it seemed so settled, was I not, Emmy? But then I never was the least bit weather-wise, and never shall be, I am afraid."

"I have seen a good deal of the sea at different times of my life," explained Mr. Graham.

As Emmy heard, she could not help remembering that before marriage her mother's home (and consequently the home of her mother's brother likewise) had been in a North of England sea-port. But of course she said nothing, and, lest she should be so much as suspected of suspicion, turned with an air of indifference to look at the long line of white breakers which fringed the coast. But she had hardly looked when she exclaimed :

"What can all those people be doing down there? Just look, there seems to be quite a crowd. Has anything happened, I wonder?"

She pointed to a part of the beach about a quarter of a mile off, where, in front of the oldest and most unfashionable end of the village, a group of some thirty or forty people was collected—a very unusual phenomenon in that quiet part of the world.

Mr. Graham cast a quick glance out to sea.

"There is a boat trying to come in," he said.

The ladies looked, and saw, a short way from the shore, just opposite the point at which

the throng was assembled, a small black object, of which they could scarcely tell at first whether it was a buoy or a little fishing-boat, tossing up and down among the waves, sometimes borne high on the crest of a great ridge of water, sometimes lost to sight altogether.

“Good Heavens!” cried Olivia, “what will become of them? Oh! let us go and see—let us go at once.”

She seized Emmy’s arm, and all the party hastened forward in the direction of the rapidly increasing crowd, watching meanwhile as narrowly as they could the movements of the boat. As they drew nearer they saw that it was still tossing about as tumultuously as ever, and making scarcely any way. The tide, which had been coming in all morning, had just turned, and notwithstanding that the wind was south-west, and consequently blowing towards the land, the backward current of the water was so strong that it was scarcely possible for so small a boat on a rough sea to make head against it. Nor was this the worst of the danger.

“I don’t see how she is to get in with only

one man to work her," said Mr. Graham, after looking fixedly for a minute or two.

"Only one man!" echoed Olivia in dismay. "Poor unfortunate creature, what can have tempted——"

"He has gone out to bring in his nets, I fancy. You see those stakes yonder;" here he pointed to sundry posts the tops of which every now and then became visible above the waves in the neighbourhood of the boat. "That is where they spread their nets—I suppose this man wanted to save his, and could find nobody to help him."

Olivia looked towards the boat in compassionate terror. Yes, it was too true; on advancing nearer she could see for herself that it had only one occupant—a big stalwart-looking man, whose features, as he was ever and anon upborne by a wave, she could discern plainly, as also his straining efforts to approach the shore. But frantic as those efforts evidently were, they were all too feeble to force a passage through the rolling masses of water which, as fast as the boat had laboriously made a few feet of way, hurled it back and left it

helplessly rocking in a valley of white foam.


By this time the party found themselves on the outskirts of the crowd—a crowd made up almost entirely of the inhabitants of the fishermen's cottages which mainly composed that end of the village.

"Oh! what do you think? will he be lost?" cried Olivia, fastening eagerly on a grey-haired old fisherman whom she thought likely to be more experienced than the rest.

"Can't zay how it mid be, miss. But it do look like it."

"What! with so many standing by! Oh! can nothing be done to help him?"

"I don't know what," said the man, looking stolidly out at the dreary prospect of angry waves and frowning sky. "You can zee vor yourzelf. Well, whatever comes to en, 'twere noo volk's doens but his own. I twold en he were a vool, and zoo he were. When he couldden geet two men or dree men to goo, a chile mid ha' known woon man wouldden be much good a bringen hwome nets a day like this. But he were like a madman about theasem nets o' his, though he'd be pleased enough



now to come back 'ithout 'em if zoo be he could come back at all. Well, it idden my vault; I twold en avore he went."

"And zoo I twold en too," put in another bystander, "and zaid I wouldden goo wi' en not vor vivty poun'. But he were always woon vor his own way, or his nets 'ud ha' been zafe at hwome like his neighbours. I twold en yees-terday it were a-gwayen to come on a blwow."

"He don't understan' the ways of our zea noo mwore than of us," said the old man to whom Olivia had spoken. "Let en goo back to where he come vrom, and where maybe the zea is better vriends wi' en. It idden because he's took a Dorset wife that he's got a right to take the bread out of other volks' mouths that he don't belong to. Teeh! did you zee that? If he geets knocked among theasem pwosts it will be bad vor en."

A heavy wave had struck the boat, and sent it reeling along towards the place where the stakes already spoken of showed their half submerged heads above water. The unfortunate rower seemed to be losing strength, for the wave had subsided, but the boat drifted nearer and

nearer to the danger.


"Ahoy! my boy, sheer off, sheer off!" bel-
lowed the old fisherman, warmed up into sud-
den excitement by the imminence of the peril,
and vociferating with superhuman energy
through a natural speaking-trumpet formed of
his hands.

But he might as well have spoken to the
wind, which bore away his words as they left
his lips, and dissipated them uselessly into space.

The boat struck heavily against one of the
posts and swung round. At the same instant
another wave was seen rolling forward with gi-
gantic arched neck to the assault, and all on
shore held their breath.

A great roar and dash, and everything was
lost to sight behind a cloud of spray. The
wave had met the obstacle and broken over it.

The spray dispersed, and again the boat was
visible, still in the same place as before. There
was a sound from the spectators—not a cheer,
however, but a half shuddering groan. The
boat, entangled among the posts so that it
could not drift further, lay floating keel upper-
most.



In another moment a head appeared above the water a yard or two beyond the boat, and again those on shore held their breath. The waves came and went, and still the head was seen on the surface, but still no nearer than at first. It was evident that the backward suction of the tide made it as difficult for the swimmer to come within reach of the support offered by the upturned hull as it had previously been for the rower to bring his craft to land. At last a mighty wave rose, and, dashing over the head of the still struggling man, hurled him violently forward. When the subsiding spray again allowed him to become visible, he was discovered clinging to the capsized boat, and there ran through the group of spectators a murmur of satisfaction.

"Yees, but what's the good o't iv we can't geet at en?" Olivia heard the old man beside her say between his teeth.

Apparently the same question suggested itself to others, for the murmur of satisfaction died away, and a dead despondent silence followed.

A few seconds passed thus, and then the

lookers-on saw a hand held up above the waves, gesticulating wildly towards the shore.

"Oh! save him! save him!" exclaimed Olivia, turning with passionate entreaty towards the old fisherman. "Will you let him drown in your sight, and not so much as try?"

"We'd be very glad to zave en, miss, if zoo be we could. But as vor tryen 't'ud be nought but putten ourzelves in the zame case."

"What! and will nobody help him then?" Olivia looked across the sea to the spot where the hand was still held up in mute supplication, and felt her very heart turn cold with horror.

"Who will put out with me?" cried a voice behind her.

With a sudden bound of all her pulses, Olivia turned round and saw the speaker. It was Mr. Graham, who, having made choice of a roomy strong-looking boat, one of three or four that stood drawn up on the beach, was already stooping to undo the fastenings.

For a while there was no answer, but presently the old fisherman made himself spokesman for the rest.

"It can't be done, maister. Our lives be as

dear to us as thik chap's to him. Look at the zea, and we know zom'at of the zea, mind you."

"Ay, ay, we know," said another, and a general hum of assent went round the crowd.

Mr. Graham looked steadily towards the grim expanse of waters.

"I know something of the sea too," he replied, "and I believe it can be done. Twenty pounds apiece to the three brave fellows who will go with me—come."

Another silence followed—rather a longer one this time—and then the old fisherman, with a dogged shake of the head, spoke again :

"'Twoont do, maister, 'twoont do. You have got the money p'raps, and p'raps you haven't, but money is money, and life is life."

"And that man's life!" cried Olivia, looking despairingly at the uplifted hand still stretched out to implore aid. "Oh! can nothing save him, can no money——"

"Money woont make the zea goo down when he's up, miss."

Olivia could say no more, could only watch the beseeching gestures of that hand in silent

anguish. There was a pause, and then a voice behind her, the same voice that had spoken before, asked :

“Will none of you come with me—not one ? Then must I go alone ?”

There was no answer, and Olivia understood that the invitation was rejected. She looked round—with a face strangely colourless, but with eyes that glowed with a concentrated fire of resolution.

“I will go with you, if you will let me. I can row, and shall surely be better than nobody.”

“You !” ejaculated Mr. Graham, and looked at her as though scarcely sure that he had heard aright.

“Yes, I,” said Olivia quietly, and she spoke with so assured a manner that not one of all the bystanders who turned their astonished eyes towards her could doubt that she meant it.

Among those who looked with the most attention was the old fisherman. She was about to speak again, when, laying his hand somewhat unceremoniously on her shoulder, he pushed past her towards Mr. Graham, saying :

“Dang it, if the maids be’n’t afeard o’ the zea,

'tween't do vor the men to be. Here, maister, I'll goo wi' you vor woon."

"And I vor another, maister."

"And I."

The crew was made up, but still from a dozen to twenty more volunteers offered, who, finding themselves not required to man the boat, devoted their energies to dragging it down to the water's edge, bringing oars and grappling irons, and otherwise expediting the launch. With so many to help, all the preparations were soon made, and in scarcely more time than it takes to write the words the little craft was fully equipped, and with her living freight lay just within the white fringe of froth left by the last wave, ready to try what chances might await her on the stormy sea which chafed and fumed beyond.

Ah! how that sea chafed and fumed surely! As Olivia saw the great breakers rise up and roll towards the shore with a roar as of wild beasts advancing on their prey, she was half impelled to rush forward to the boat and implore its crew not to put forth. But then her eye caught sight of that other boat on which

the breakers had already wreaked their fury, and of the hand which still beckoned entreatingly beside it; and she felt that at any risk the attempt at rescue must be made. Still at the same time she felt that the pain of seeing it made was almost more than she could bear, and with an instinctive seeking for sympathy and companionship she looked round for Mrs. Waters and Emmy, whose very existence she had forgotten. They were standing at a little distance, both greatly agitated, especially Mrs. Waters, who seemed almost to cling to her daughter for support. Half involuntarily Olivia drew a few steps nearer to them.

Again she turned towards the sea. The boat was in the act of pushing off, following in the wake of a retreating wave with an impetuous rush that threatened to drag it under another wave which was coming in and which for a moment seemed to stand over it like a wall. Olivia expected nothing else but that boat and men would be engulfed together, and averted her eyes. Presently she heard a great shout from the spectators which did not sound like a shout of horror, and she ventured once more to

glance upwards. The tiny bark, well away from the shore, was riding triumphantly on the top of the waves.

A few minutes of suspense succeeded—minutes every one of which looked like an age. Again and again the boat was hidden from view by some great bank of water that rose up between it and the shore, but again and again it re-appeared in safety, each time nearer the spot where the drowning man still clung to the cap-sized craft, still held in its place by the wooden stakes among which it had drifted. At last the spot was all but reached.

Once more Olivia withdrew her gaze. The boat, as it ceased to cut through the water, rocked so violently to and fro among the breakers that she absolutely dared not watch it further. What if it should share the fate of that other?

One second passed, and another and another, and in the intensity of her straining expectation Olivia's heart seemed to have stopped its pulsations. Suddenly she heard a new shout from those on the beach, and on raising her eyes the first sight that met them was a wild waving of

hats and caps in front of her. She looked towards the boat, and saw that it had left the overturned keel behind (with no man clinging to it now), and was making for the shore. The rescuers had done their work, and were coming home with the rescued.

But a heavy and perilous task yet remained for them. The wind-beaten waves still swelled and tossed furiously on every side, and the same backward draught of water which had rendered it impossible for one rower to approach the shore made it a work of danger and difficulty even for a crew of four. But in spite of danger and difficulty, in spite of towering waves which flung them forward with a violence that threatened to swamp them and then dragged them back a longer way than a minute's patient rowing sufficed to make up, in spite of all obstacles it was apparent that the distance between the boat and the land was diminishing.

Meanwhile Olivia stood and watched with an anxiety which increased rather than lessened as its end seemed to approach. A few minutes or seconds would now decide the whole issue,

and the fewer those minutes or seconds became the more critical did they appear. The boat seemed to be coming in at a little distance from the point where it had gone out, and the crowd had moved off some way to meet it, but Olivia still stood rooted to the spot where she had stood at first. Perhaps if Mrs. Waters and Emmy had gone forward she might have mechanically followed them, but they too remained behind spell-bound and motionless.

The decisive moment had arrived. A few feet only intervened between the rowers and safety, but behind rose a huge wave which, if it reached the shore before they did, might even yet drag them back and engulf them. A film floated before Olivia's eyes, and for a while she could see nothing.

All at once the sound of voices burst upon her ear—a wild confused sound at first, shaping itself as it went on into a cheer the longest and loudest she had ever heard, a cheer which the very sea and sky seemed to echo back.

The boat was being hauled up on the beach.

CHAPTER XI.

After the Storm.

IT was as though a load of lead had suddenly lifted itself from Olivia's heart.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed fervently, and drew a breath of infinite relief.

"Thank Heaven!" echoed a stifled voice at her side.

She looked round, and saw Mrs. Waters, who, with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes, stood leaning on Emmy's arm, trembling violently.

"Oh! mamma, dear mamma, don't," entreated Emmy, who was herself, however, a good deal agitated. "It is all over now, you know."

But Emmy's attempt at consolation only made her mother break down outright.

"It is very foolish of me, dear. But—but it is so dreadful to see any one—to see people in such danger."

Olivia was silent; she felt somehow afraid of being overcome too, and for some time none of the three spoke. At last Emmy, seeing her mother grow more composed, cast a longing glance towards the throng of people collected round the returned boat.

"May we not go and look too, mamma?"

Olivia was quite grateful to Emmy for the suggestion. She had been two or three times on the point of making it herself, but had been restrained by an unaccountable feeling of shyness.

They moved in the direction of the crowd. But just as they had reached its outskirts there was a sudden parting in the mass, and a falling back of people on one side and another as though to make way. The ladies of course fell back too.

In the passage thus opened up there presently appeared something that was being carried along shoulder-high by three or four bearers. Olivia saw at a second glance that this

something was a stretcher, improvised out of a couple of planks roped together, with a man lying on it.

She felt her limbs ready to give way under her. Who could it be? Was it possible that——But no, in another moment she saw Mr. Graham emerge from the crowd, walking by the side of the men who were carrying the stretcher. She was wonderfully relieved. It would have been so dreadful if he—the person who had been foremost in the act of mercy—had suffered serious injury by his generous heroism.

The little group with the stretcher was moving off the beach towards the village, and the crowd was beginning to disperse.

“What is the matter? who is hurt?” hastily inquired Olivia of the person next her, a large-boned shock-headed youth of very raw and rustic appearance.

“’Tis Evan Griffiths,” answered the lad, with a loutish stare.

“Evan Griffiths?”

“Yees. He’s a-got an outlandish name like, ’cause he comes vrom an outlandish place.”

"Is that the man they went out to save?" asked Olivia, bethinking herself of some expressions let fall by the old fisherman.

"The chap as were in the water? Yees."

"And is he much hurt? Oh! what is the matter?"

"He's a-got his lag broke, drough the zide o' the bwoat a hetten en like. They be a carryen of en to the invirmary."

"His leg broken! poor man, how dreadful! And he is going to the infirmary—oh! I hope they will treat him well and take care of him."

"Oh! they'll take care of en, noo vear vor that. I heerd the gen'l'man zay myzelf as how he 'ud goo wi' en an' speak to the doctors vor en."

"The gentleman! The gentleman that went out in the boat?"

"Yees, that's the woon."

Olivia looked after the little procession as it filed round a corner into the rustic High Street, and for a while kept silence, not trusting herself to speak. For she was thinking how brave and generous and considerate some people in this

world were, and of how much more value to their fellow-creatures than a poor useless being like herself, who was only fit to stand by, meaning well but doing nothing. Ah! if she could only be of some use too, she who was so much envied for having more money than she knew what to do with—Suddenly she bethought herself of a way in which money might be made to do something towards helping the good work.

“And this poor man—this Evan Griffiths,” she asked, turning once more to the boy—“he has others depending on him, I suppose. Is he married?”

“Oh yees! he’s a-married.”

“And has he any children?”

“I think there be dree o’ ’em if ye count the babby.”

“Where do they live?” demanded Olivia eagerly. “Here in the village?”

“No, no. They ized to, but they couldden pay the rent. Do live now zome ’eres up Brookston way.”

Brookston was a hamlet between two and three miles inland.

"Up Brookston way? Can't you tell me more exactly than that?"

"Where be Griffiths's new house, Jimmy?" asked the lad of a companion who stood near.

"Where be Griffiths's new house?" echoed the second youth, coming shuffling up at the question. "Why, in Brookston, to be sure. I went by 'en yeesterday, an' zeed Mrs. Griffiths wi' my own eyes a-standen at the door like. Oh! I zay, woon't she be in a taken when she hears?"

"Woon't she? Ay, I nar thought o' that," said the first boy, scratching his head, and staring at his friend as though at the propounder of some great discovery.

"'Tis my consait zome woon ought to goovor to let her know," rejoined the other. "She wull be in a perty taken, for sartain."

"I'll tell ye what, Jim, I'll goo."

"An' I'll goo wi' ye," said Jim. "Come along, and let's zee who'll be vust."

"Stop," interposed Olivia. She felt that the self-appointed messengers, though probably good-hearted lads enough as lads go, were un-

dertaking their task with a gusto which precluded all hope of delicacy or tenderness in the manner of its performance. "You are very good boys, but I am afraid——You shall show me the way to this poor woman's, and I will go and break the news to her myself."

"You be a-gwayen yourself to tell her?" said one of the boys in astonishment.

"Certainly I am," answered Olivia firmly. "So I will say good-bye for an hour or two," she added, turning round to her two friends, who were standing a little way behind, where they could hear all that passed. "I will be as quick as I possibly can."

"Oh! Miss Egerton," cried Emmy, "surely you don't mean——All the way to Brookston——why, it will tire you to death. And it is coming on to be a wet afternoon, I'm sure."

"Yees, that's sartain," said Jim, holding out the back of his sunburnt hand. "The drops be a-vallen already."

"You will get wet through," declared Emmy.

"I am afraid you will indeed," said her mother.

"I dare say I shall, but I shan't mind that—it will do me good." And really Olivia felt as though the prospect of getting wet heightened her ardour in the undertaking; a little discomfort in the execution of her task would increase its value as a contribution to the good cause. "There, I must be gone now, or I shan't be in time to be of any use after all. Take your mamma home at once, Emmy dear; she is looking quite pale and miserable. Now then, the nearest way, please."

Olivia moved off under the escort of her two guides. But she had not gone more than a few steps when she returned.

"Oh! Mrs. Waters, I forgot to say that—that——You need not wait dinner for me, of course."

"But indeed we shall; we could not think of anything else."

"Well, yes, just as you like—I shall be back very soon. And—and by the way, you will remember to keep my little secret for me, eh?"

"Your secret, Miss Egerton?"

"Yes, about the governess, I mean—I don't

want anybody to find out. You will both remember, won't you?"

And then, without waiting for an answer, Olivia rushed back to rejoin her guides, and Mrs. Waters and Emmy took their way towards their lodgings. As Olivia had observed, Mrs. Waters looked very much in need of rest.

"How wonderfully brave that Mr. Graham is!" said Emmy, after they had walked a little while in silence.

She had been pondering over the scene of the morning, and the remark had escaped her as a half involuntary expression of genuine admiration.

"Ah! is he not?" returned Mrs. Waters earnestly.

There was something about the words and the manner in which they were uttered which, rightly or wrongly, suggested to Emmy a feeling of personal gratification on the part of the speaker. In spite of the respect with which Mr. Graham's conduct had inspired her, she grew jealous again immediately.

"It does seem so strange that I should never have heard the name of Graham before," she

said presently—"never in connection with a friend of yours, that is, for of course the name itself——" Here she paused with something of a startled air; she had just thought of a coincidence which at first sight did certainly seem rather curious. "By the way, grandmamma Maxwell was a Graham before she was married, was she not?"

Perhaps because she was herself struck by the coincidence, Mrs. Waters did not answer for a few seconds.

"Yes, dear," she replied at last in rather an under tone. "But—but the name is very common up in our part of the country."

"Then this Mr. Graham is no relation of yours?" was a question that trembled on Emmy's lips. But when she tried to give it utterance she found that she had not the courage. It has elsewhere been said that there was a forbidden subject on which she had all her life been accustomed to curb her curiosity, and the force of this habit was still potent with her. And then, apart from all other objections, how could she speak words which would imply (for of course they could be taken in no other sense)

that she suspected her mother of introducing a thief and a forger into the family circle under a false name and under false pretences? However delicately she might put it, such a suggestion could not be other than an insult—an insult to her mother, who was the soul of uprightness and honourable feeling, an insult to the brave man who had that very day performed under her eyes an act of self-devoted heroism such as she had never before witnessed. And as Emmy came to this point, she felt as though she had already committed a crime in allowing suspicions so unworthy even to pass through her brain. So of course the treasonable question was suppressed; and, as almost immediately afterwards the threatened rain began to fall pretty heavily, little or nothing more was said during the hurried walk home.

Emmy continued in this penitent and self-accusing mood all the rest of the morning, so that by the time the usual dinner hour arrived, bringing with it the guest who had been invited the day before, she was much more frank and cordial than he had yet found her. She was sure she had done him great wrong, and

was determined to make up for it.

"And how is the poor man?" she inquired as soon as the first greetings and congratulations were over.

"Very much exhausted, of course, but the doctors seem to think he may do very well. I waited with him till the bone was set, and all was going on favourably. But—but I am afraid I have come rather early."

He accompanied the last words with a glance round the room as though he were looking for some one whom he missed. And yet Mrs. Waters and Emmy were both present.

"No," said Mrs. Waters; "we have been expecting you for some time. But we have put dinner off for an hour because of Miss Egerton—she has gone to see the wife of this Evan Griffiths and break the news to her, and as it is a walk of nearly six miles there and back I knew we should have to wait."

"A walk of six miles through this rain?" said the visitor, looking surprised and a little concerned as well. "And why——could not some one else——"

"Miss Egerton did not like to trust anybody

but herself," explained Mrs. Waters. "She was afraid of the poor woman being unnecessarily frightened, and really if you had seen the two rough boys who were offering to go, you would have said there was some danger."

"Still I do think," put in Emmy, "it was a pity to go herself just when it was coming on to rain. She might have told the boys what to say, you know, and that would have done just as well. But that is always the way with Miss Egerton; she never cares for her own trouble if she thinks there is any good to be done. Oh! she is the dearest, kindest——"

Here Emmy bethought herself that there might be a risk of letting out more than she intended, and came to rather an abrupt stop. Mr. Graham, though he had seemed to be listening with some interest, did not say anything to induce her to resume, and the conversation wandered off to other topics, Olivia's name not being again mentioned till she had herself made her appearance.

She was considerably longer in making her appearance than Emmy had expected. For Emmy had expected that, either forgetting the

visitor's presence or not heeding it, she would on her return peep as usual into the sitting-room to report herself as she went upstairs. But when the door at last opened, Olivia entered, not in her wet walking things, but ready dressed for dinner, and very well dressed too, with her rich masses of dark hair disposed in her most becoming style, and with no sign about her of having been out in wind and rain save the heightened colour on her cheeks. Emmy thought she had never seen her look so well.

But, well as she looked, well as she was perhaps conscious of looking, Olivia did not enter quite with her usual self-possession. She appeared unwontedly nervous and embarrassed, and lingered for an instant in the doorway as though she was not very sure whom to speak to first, or in which part of the room to take her place.

Her uncertainty was decided by the visitor, who happened to be sitting near the door, and who immediately rose to offer her a chair.

"Oh! thank you," she murmured, and glided

forward to the seat thus placed for her. Here she found herself almost close to Mr. Graham, towards whom, after another interval of indecision, she raised her eyes.

"I must congratulate you on the good work which you performed this morning," she said, not without some appearance of effort.

"The work is yours quite as much as mine," he answered. "If you had not said what you did, I should have had to go alone or not at all."

Olivia's cheeks grew scarlet. She had been quite tormenting herself during her walk about the incident of which he spoke, finding her chief consolation in the hope that people might have forgotten it altogether. Her behaviour must have seemed so unfeminine on the one hand, so absurdly and impotently mock-heroic on the other!

"I—I hardly knew what I was saying," she stammered. "I was so excited that I felt as if I could do anything almost, and I never thought how ridiculous I was making myself. If I had stopped to consider——"

"If you had stopped to consider, Miss Eger-

ton, that man's life would have been lost at any rate, and perhaps mine too."

She smiled and shook her head, not knowing what to say. But secretly she felt very much relieved.

"And how is your patient going on?" she asked presently.

Mr. Graham repeated the substance of what he had already told Mrs. Waters and Emmy, adding, before Olivia had time to speak again :

"You have taken a long walk through the rain to see his wife, I believe."

Again Olivia was a little put out. She would have preferred Mr. Graham to know nothing about her errand to Brookston ; he would think she was always meddling.

"It would have been so dreadful if the poor woman had been told roughly or unkindly," she said, half apologetically.

"Was she in a great way about it, then?" asked Emmy.

"Yes, she was in terrible grief indeed. I could hardly get her to believe that things were not worse than they really are. And she seemed

such a good warm-hearted woman that it made one all the more sorry for her."

"Poor creature!" said Mrs. Waters sympathisingly. "And there are three children, are there not?"

"Yes, three quite little children," answered Olivia, recovering from her embarrassment in proportion as she became interested in the subject of Mrs. Griffiths and her family. "And they have been unfortunate in so many ways, poor things, without any fault of their own. The husband is a Welshman, and, though he married a Dorsetshire wife, seems always to have been looked on at Nidbourne as a kind of interloper—and then some months ago they lost a little trifle they had laid up by the absconding of the manager of a Savings' Bank—and they have had to move—oh! almost everything seems to have gone against them. And yet their poor little house is so clean and neat—it is quite touching to look at it; and the woman herself is such a good gentle creature——"

"Mamma," interrupted Emmy, "I think you and I ought to go and see her. Will you take us there to-morrow, Miss Egerton?"

"Very well, dear. I am sure you will be very much pleased."

"Oh! I know that already," said Emmy. "Poor dear woman—I declare I feel quite interested in her. And she was very grateful to you for having taken such a walk on her account, of course?"

"She was very much obliged," answered Olivia with a slight relapse into confusion, for she did not want this theme of her walk to be further harped upon. She paused an instant, considering how she might divert the conversation altogether from the subject of Mrs. Griffiths and her family, when suddenly she be-thought herself that she was making an omission calculated to do the poor woman injustice in the eyes of her chief benefactor, and resumed:

"Oh! Mr. Graham, I should not forget to mention how gratefully she spoke of you and what you have done for her. I can't repeat half of what she said."

"Mr. Graham ought to come with us and see her too," said Emmy graciously, for she felt that she owed their guest some amends for the coldness with which she had at first treated

him. "It is a beautiful walk to Brookston, and if the day is fine it will really be quite a pleasant expedition."

"Thank you," was the instant response. "I should like to go with you very much."

"And then, Miss Egerton," continued Emmy, "while we are so near, you and I can go on to Brookston Mill and take that sketch we have been always wanting to do. Oh! it will be quite charming."

Dinner was just then announced, but before they sat down everything was settled according to Emmy's suggestion, and an appointment made for Mr. Graham to call for the ladies after breakfast next morning, and let himself be taken to Brookston under their guidance.

In spite of the delay which Olivia's absence had occasioned, it was still comparatively early in the afternoon when dinner was over, so that a good many hours remained to be disposed of before the day should be at an end. These hours it was moreover necessary to spend in the house, the weather continuing such that a walk was not to be thought of. But somehow the time did not appear nearly so wearisome to the

party assembled within doors as might have been expected, and as certainly Olivia would have expected could she have been told yesterday morning that she would have to pass so many hours in the company of a person who was then a total stranger to her. As it was, however, even Olivia did not feel it dull. Before the evening was over she had discovered once for all that Mr. Graham did not in the least answer to her preconceived notion of an Anglo-Indian, but was a man of taste and a scholar, with ideas of his own on music and pictures and books, and ideas which he could very well express. And even when he talked of other things than these Olivia did not find him tiresome.

CHAPTER XII.

To Brookston Mill.

THE next day came, and brought with it weather little short of perfection. The storm had passed away and left no trace behind, save in the brighter green of the refreshed grass, glittering here and there with rainbow-coloured drops, and in the deeper blue of the clear sunlit vault overhead. It was spring, and all surrounding objects shone through the purified atmosphere with the brilliancy of relief and colour that spring alone can give. The spruce fronts of distant cottages or farm-houses shone like dazzling specks of whiteness dotted over the green landscape, and the little feathery streaks of vapour which flecked the face of the all but cloudless sky gleamed like snow-wreaths against the rich blue that glowed beyond. Altogether

the day was one of those on which we seem to look at nature through a medium less gross and obstructive than usual.

The morning being so fine, it was evident that the programme suggested by Emmy on the previous day might be safely carried out; and Mr. Graham, calling at the appointed hour, found the two younger ladies fully equipped and ready to set out. The two younger ladies only, for the excitement of the day before had cost Mrs. Waters a severe headache, which, though she would not hear of Olivia and Emmy staying at home on her account, made it quite impossible for her to accompany them.

Perhaps partly in consequence of Mrs. Waters's absence, the conversation during the walk to Evan Griffiths's cottage was much more stiff and artificial than it had been within doors the evening before. It is always difficult to take up an acquaintanceship at the precise point where its progress has been interrupted, and in this case the difficulty was increased by the presence of a semi-hostile element in the person of Emmy. For Emmy, in proportion as her admiring recollection of Mr. Graham's self-devotion became

less vivid, found herself more and more disposed to revert to the old questions—Who was this Mr. Graham, and how came it that she had never heard of him before? Engrossed in these meditations, she was not in the mood for being so gracious to the visitor as on other grounds she would have wished to be, and he and Olivia were consequently left to carry on the conversation with little or no assistance. Thus thrown on their own resources, the two were very silent and constrained, speaking seldom, and then only as some subject of remark was suggested by the succession of external objects. And yet, tame and trivial as the discourse was, it somehow did not strike Olivia as being so, and this though she was usually peculiarly impatient of common-place. But then the walk was so pleasant—now leading them athwart sunny fields with nothing overhead save the blue sky and carolling lark, now through shady lanes overhung with sweet-smelling may-blossom—one of the pleasantest indeed that she had ever taken.

In due time the party reached their destination—a tiny thatched dwelling standing by itself at the extremity of the straggling little

hamlet called Brookston, and giving one by its very situation an idea of more or less forlornness and isolation. Here they found Mrs. Griffiths, a gentle, fair, pleasant-faced woman of the ordinary Dorsetshire type. She was this morning somewhat worn and haggard-looking as though from want of rest, and yet was clean and tidy in her person, in spite of manifest poverty and the harassment of seeing after three little children, the eldest just old enough to run about and get into mischief, the youngest still an infant in arms.

Olivia's report had not exaggerated the poor mother's gratitude. No sooner did her friend of yesterday introduce Mr. Graham as the gentleman to whom she was mainly indebted for her husband's life than she broke into a strain of passionate thanksgiving almost incoherent in its fervour, and not a little embarrassing to the person to whom it was addressed.

"You, sir, you—were it you? And me not to know it by only looken into your face! Ah! sir, the Lord in Heaven's blessen be wi' you, and my blessen and the children's, vor they shall learn to ask it vor you avore they learn

aught besides—vor you and your wife and your childern, and every hair of all their heads.”

“But I don’t happen to have a wife and children,” said Mr. Graham, smiling at the flow of her eloquence, and yet apparently wincing under it too, and with an evident desire to bring it to a close.

“Haven’t you? Then I hope you zoon wull have, and worthy o’ you, an’ better than that I can’t wish you. Oh! sir, forgive me if zoo be I zay mwore than I ought,” she added with sudden terror as she raised her eyes to her benefactor’s face, which a dark flush had overspread. “I wouldden offend you—no, not vor the worold.”

He smiled again—rather a forced awkward smile perhaps, but it reassured the poor woman wonderfully.

“I am not so foolish as to be offended with so good a wish as that,” he answered; and though there was still something of stiffness and constraint in his manner, it might have been more easily taken for a touch of melancholy than of annoyance. Mrs. Griffiths was quite relieved, and was about to speak again when

he somewhat hurriedly resumed: "You have not asked yet if we have brought you any news. I called at the infirmary this morning, and your husband is going on as well as possible. He was asleep, or I would have asked if he had a message for you."

"Ah! sir, how can I ever zay how thankvul —But I never can, zoo 'tis noo use. And zoo thankvul as he is too, sir, to be zaved to his poor wife and childern. Vor I had a zight of en last night, sir, at the invirmary—they couldden deny me when they heard how vur I'd come just vor woon look—and he were as calm and peacevul's a chile, sir, till I come to talk of you, and then he vell a-cryen, and they pushed me out o' the room and zent me hwome in noo time. He ha' got a good veelen heart, sir, though I zay it that oughn't, and vor all he comes vrom vurrin parts like, he ha' made as kind a husband to me an' the childern, and as zober an' hard-worken—Oh dear! oh dear! when I think of it all——"

She broke down in a violent fit of crying.

Mr. Graham looked at her compassionately,

then, fumbling in his waistcoat-pocket, said, with a glance round the poor interior :

“I am afraid that while he is laid up you may perhaps have occasion to miss him in more ways than one. Will you accept this as a little assistance in the meantime—just for the present, you know.”

And thus saying he put a couple of sovereigns into her hand.

She looked at them through her tears with astonished eyes.

“What! sir, all thease money vor me! After what the dear young lady——”

She caught Olivia’s eye, and subsided into an embarrassed silence. The fact was, she had yesterday received a present of no less than five pounds, but under so strict a promise of secresy that she was afraid of offending her patroness irretrievably if she added another word. But she had already said enough for Mr. Graham to guess something of the truth—only something, for the idea that Olivia’s liberality had been on such a scale did not occur to him for an instant.

Meanwhile Olivia, terribly disturbed at having

been so near discovery, was casting about how to bring the visit to a close.

"Emmy dear, if we are to have any time for sketching at Brookston Mill we had better be thinking of saying good-bye. Oh! Mrs. Griffiths, can you tell us which is the nearest way?"

"What! to zee the view all the gentle-volks think zoo much on? Turn into the vields by the gate hard bezide our house, and then keep on by the hedge. And zoo you're a-gwayen already, are you—avore I've zaid a word a'-most. But indeed if you stopped all day I never could zay words enough to show how I veel your kindness, sir, and yours, miss—a comen yeesterday drough the rain to zee me, you know," added the good woman hastily as she found herself getting once more on dangerous ground.

"Oh! never mind that," said Olivia quickly.
"And now, Emmy, really——"

Emmy rather wondered at her friend's impatience, but declared herself quite ready, and shortly afterwards the party, having taken leave as briefly as Mrs. Griffiths's renewed protest-

ations of gratitude permitted, were once more on their way.

In spite of the hurry she had been in, Olivia did not finally part from Mrs. Griffiths till a minute or two after the others, having gone back to the cottage almost immediately on leaving it, under pretext of having forgotten something, but in reality to reiterate her exhortations to secrecy with regard to all donations past or future. On returning to the spot where she had left her companions, just at the entrance of the fields through which they had been directed, she found that Mr. Graham was politely waiting to hold open for her a ponderous five-barred gate which stopped the way. He was alone, Emmy having already strolled forward into the first field, where she was to be seen some distance ahead gathering flowers by the hedge-side. Olivia did not know how it was, but, on finding herself thus waited for, she became all at once very much flurried; not exactly disagreeably so, but still very much flurried.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," she said as she drew near, and in saying so she blushed, though she was not in an ordinary way a person given to blushing.

He murmured some polite generality by way of reply, then added, as she passed through the gate, which he still held open :

"I see you have been kinder to that poor family than you were willing to let us know."

Olivia faltered something about a "trifle," and blushed still more. The fact of Mr. Graham having found out something which she had not told Mrs. Waters or Emmy seemed to establish a kind of secret understanding between them. And then, too, she was in trepidation lest the discovery might strike him as inconsistent with her character of poor governess.

"A trifle goes a long way sometimes, Miss Egerton. A few shillings to poor people like those are worth more than a few pounds to others."

She was relieved by finding how little he guessed that a few pounds were what she had actually given, and recovered sufficient self-possession to make the somewhat hypocritical answer :

"Everybody ought to do what they are able, you know."

"A very good rule if only everybody was as

liberal in fixing the standard of ability as you are. But there are some ladies of large fortune who perhaps would consider they were not able to give more in money than you have given, and I fancy there are none who would think themselves able to give so much in trouble."

Olivia was wont rather to pique herself on her power of parrying a compliment, but this time she felt as helplessly tongue-tied as a school-girl, perhaps because she was also conscious of feeling a sort of school-girlish pleasure in what had been said to her. She was naturally gratified to find that she had so entirely succeeded in keeping her secret. And this was not quite all that gratified her either.

By this time they had nearly come up with Emmy, who was still peeping and botanising by the hedge-side. On hearing them so near, she rose and came eagerly forward, a bunch of flowers and ferns in her hand.

"Oh! Miss Egerton, see what a beautiful bouquet I am making up. These lovely sprays of double hawthorn—are they not splendid? But there is one flower here that quite puzzles

me—look, this little white one. Have you any idea what it is?”

“Not the slightest, except that it is very pretty,” said Olivia, examining a little flower which Emmy had pulled out of the bunch, “but then you know I am very stupid at such things. Here, dear, you had better take it home and show it to your mamma.”

“Oh! you can keep it if you like; there are ever so many more growing in a little patch, and I am going back to get them. Walk on slowly, and I shall soon follow.”

Emmy ran back to her hedge, and Olivia and Mr. Graham went leisurely forward. There was nothing said for some little time, during which Olivia kept bending her head over Emmy's flower with great apparent attention.

“Perhaps you could tell us what it is, Mr. Graham?” she said at last when the silence was beginning to appear irksome.

“I! You cannot expect a man who has spent half his life in India to know anything about English wild flowers. I should rather have thought you the person to apply to, living in the country, and——”

"Ah! if I had lived in the country always, I should have been an authority, I dare say. But I was teaching in a school in London up to three years ago, and one has not much opportunity of studying wild flowers there."

"Teaching in a school! You have gone through such an ordeal as that!" and he looked at her as though a new phase of her character had been disclosed to him. "Why, that is a life which I have always fancied to be about the hardest and dullest and dreariest that can fall to the lot of anybody."

"Well, there is not much excitement about it certainly. Still I don't know that I found it so very dreadful as you seem to imagine."

"But you are better pleased to live with a pleasant cultivated family than in the most perfect of schools, surely? You are a great deal happier in your present life, are you not?"

He asked the question with an air of such solicitude that Olivia, with the fear of continued inquisition before her eyes, got quite nervous. How should she manage to keep her secret if he catechised her much further? And she was more anxious to keep it than ever. Still with

all this, there was mingled in her alarm a kind of gratification too. It was so seldom that she found herself, apart from her money, an object of interest to anybody.

"Well, yes, I think I am happier in my present life," she answered tremulously; and really, when she came to consider, there was no question that things went far more pleasantly with her now than they used to do. How would she have found time at Miss Lalande's for such a nice walk as this, for instance?

"You think! I should have imagined there was no doubt of it," he said, still with the same appearance of solicitude. "There must be such a want of the ordinary interests of life in an artificial community like a school, whereas in a family, however small it may be——"

"Oh! of course in a family it is much more cheerful," assented Olivia, as briskly as she could. But, as she spoke, she remembered what a want of the ordinary interests of life she sometimes found amid the splendours of Egerton Park, and, bethinking herself that her normal state was more solitary even than he seemed to


suppose, could not altogether repress a rising sigh.

She felt his eyes instantly turn upon her with keen inquiry, and positively trembled with alarm for what question might be coming next. But in another moment the glance was withdrawn, and when he spoke it was only to say :

“There is Miss Waters coming—a long way behind. Had we not better wait?”

Olivia acquiesced, and as Emmy, on seeing them waiting, came tripping up with accelerated pace, the awkward *tête-à-tête* was soon at an end. Surely Olivia ought to have been very much relieved. And yet, such is the inconsistency of human nature, her predominant sensation on thus finding herself safe from further questioning was something akin not so much to relief as to disappointment. She felt somehow ruffled and humiliated, as though a slight had been put upon her.

Of course she knew such a feeling to be very ridiculous, but for all that she was some time in getting rid of it, some time in recovering her full enjoyment of the sweet sights and sounds of the fair spring day. She continued rather



silent and reserved until they reached the bare hill platform crowned by Brookston Mill, and there all tongues were loosed in admiration of the surrounding view—made up of glittering blue sea, grassy sheep-dotted downs, and an infinite succession of many-tinted fields which, further chequered by white villages and dark green patches of wood, stretched away into the hazy distance till the eye could no longer follow. The view having been duly admired, the next thing to be thought of was the choice of the best possible position for the intending sketchers—a point requiring a great deal of deliberation and consultation. Here the ladies found themselves greatly aided by the taste and experience of their companion, who spared no pains in endeavouring to place them to the best advantage. By the time this important matter was settled Olivia was quite restored to equanimity, and she began her sketch with hearty good-will and a zealous desire of profiting to the utmost by the supervision of so good a judge as Mr. Graham. For she never doubted that he was going to watch the progress of the drawings.

But hardly had she made the first few strokes when he said :

“I think I should like to spend an hour or two in exploring the country yonder ; if you are sure I can be of no further use, that is.”

“Oh ! dear no,” Olivia declared, and begged that he would not hurry himself to return ; she and Miss Waters could easily go home by themselves. But even in saying this she felt the same vague sense of disappointment stealing over her which she had already experienced. She did not care a pin now whether her sketch turned out well or ill.

He thanked her for her consideration and departed. A minute or two afterwards Emmy remarked what a delightfully pleasant morning they had been spending, and Olivia assented as a matter of course. Yet when she came to think of it she hardly knew whether she had found the morning delightfully pleasant or altogether the reverse. It had been one of the two, or both, but really she could not say which.

